Josephine Bell

DEATH AT HALF TERM

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"Miss Bell has established herself as the third of the Three Great Norns (the others being Miss Sayers and Mrs. Christie) who spend their time in weaving webs of crime for our disentangling." —*Observer*

Norns—Divine giantesses

Death at Half-Term

Josephine Bell

Wintringham 04
1939

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TO
W.R.M.
IN
GRATITUDE

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FOREWORD

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Knowledge of man's frailties and stresses has caused many doctors to become writers; Somerset Maugham, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, A. J. Cronin and Warwick Deeping spring to mind. And there is Josephine Bell. Doctor, daughter of a doctor, married to a doctor, one son a doctor, she was a founder-member of the CWA in 1953, served as Chairman in 1959/60, and belongs to the Detection Club.

She commenced writing in 1936, after the death of her husband, and did not retire from practice until 1954. Her total output is some fifty books, including historical novels and studies of criminality, and many of her detective stories — from her first book in 1937 *Murder in Hospital* to *Wolf! Wolf*! in 1979 — have a medical background. Two of her detectives are doctors: Dr Colin Frost and, as here, Dr David Wintringham. Originally published in 1939, *Death at Half-Term* did not appear in America until 1965, where it took the title *Curtain Call for a Corpse*.

Death at Half-Term is particularly subtle in its milieu. We have the Denbury School in the south of England at half-term, and Dr Wintringham and his wife Jill are in attendance since his nephew, a vigorous fan of his uncle's prowess as a detective, is a boarder there. As the school cannot produce its own Shakespeare play to accompany the Fathers v Boys cricket-match, a professional group is hired to perform *Twelfth Night* in the School Hall, recalling those hardworking touring companies, doubling parts to present a complete Shakespeare play, long before Theatre in Education arrived. When the leading actor dies, the medical knowledge of the sleuth and the school doctor reveals that he has been murdered. The local superintendent proving to be somewhat lost, as is often the case, the Yard is called in, in the shape of Wintringham's old friend Inspector Mitchell. Mitchell never allows Wintringham to exceed himself or make the police look silly, as do so many gifted amateurs.

Meanwhile, the boys, in a happy echo of Greyfriars and St Jims, rush to help the police, producing forty blunt instruments — including the real one, missed in the original search. There is an outbreak of petty thievery among the actors, one romance in the staff and another in the cast, and a visiting Master with a secret past. The action moves swiftly and proves completely cathartic.

The book is a superb example of the classical Whodunnit of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. Miss Bell has a keen ear for the rhythms of speech of all the contiguous circles involved, while the accurate descriptions of

school life and the picture of the theatrical existence make a thoroughly credible scene for the cast of characters, their physical and psychological garments — you *believe* in it all.

The classic dénouement has the characters seated in the Head's sitting-room, as Mitchell and Wintringham outline the case against each actor until the simple trap closes round the killer. Then, before the reader can relax, comes the brilliant explosive climax to round off the mystery as the loose ends are quietly tied up.

john kennedy melling

THE BLACK DAGGER CRIME SERIES

The Black Dagger Crime series is a result of a joint effort between Chivers Press and a sub-committee of the Crime Writers' Association, chaired by John Kennedy Melling. It is designed to select outstanding examples of every type of detective story, drawing on the early works of CWA members, so that enthusiasts will have the opportunity to read once more classics that have been scarce for years, while introducing them to a new generation who have not previously had the chance to enjoy them.

FRIDAY

CHAPTER I

Mr. Redesdale picked up a black evening tie by its middle, ran his hands outwards along its length, inspected its stretched form with growing disgust, and finally flung it from him.

"Judith!"

His voice was tired and a little plaintive.

"What is it, darling?"

His wife appeared at the dressing-room door, holding on to the doorpost with one hand while with the other she helped her foot into a sandal. It was plain, from the exaggerated patience of her expression, that her toilet was nearly, but not quite, completed.

"I can't possibly wear that tie; the stuffing shows in the middle. Haven't I got another?"

"I expect so. Have you looked?"

Clearly he had not looked. He made a feeble gesture towards a drawer, but stood back as Judith interposed herself between him and the dressing-table. He watched her graceful movements as she turned over his handkerchiefs and collars. She was wearing a dinner dress of heavy crepe, in a dull grey-green that brightened her chestnut hair. It was a high-necked dress with long sleeves, as befitted a Headmaster's wife about to entertain the parents of the boys, but it was well cut and showed off the pretty still-youthful lines of her figure.

"Jill's fattened up a bit since the last time she was down," said Mr. Redesdale vaguely. "Suits her, don't you think?"

His wife turned with a fresh black tie in her hand, and putting it round his neck, began to tie it.

"Is that an overt criticism of my skinniness, as you usually call it?"

"No. I like you as you are, only don't overdo it. What I meant was Jill really looks the picture of health —and that youngest brat of hers is only six months old, isn't he?"

"Seven. And I really don't see why she should be congratulated for looking well seven months after the event; it would be pretty poor if she didn't. Anyway, Jill has always enjoyed rude health. When we were children she never had the infectious things half as badly as I did. Besides, she's perfectly happy; she adores David and the three kids, who are really most

attractive. When you are as happy as Jill is, you can't help looking well."

Judith stepped back to admire her work, but her husband drew nearer again and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Is Jill's sister as happy as Jill?" he asked simply.

She put her hands up to his.

"Of course. I've also got a charming husband and two charming little girls, and as Jill says, inside the school boundary fence I'm a Personage with a capital P. Well, I enjoy being a Personage: why shouldn't I? I don't laugh at everything in the world, including myself, as Jill does."

"I'm not sure she hasn't picked that up from David."

"No, she was always the same. He only encourages her."

Judith Redesdale walked back into her own room and stood in front of the mirror fastening on a pair of discreet earrings. What she had just said to Charles was true, she told herself. She did enjoy her position .as Headmaster's wife, and she enjoyed it in an entirely legitimate fashion. She was perfectly aware of her quiet talent for entertaining, of her admirable appearance, of the liking and respect that strangers invariably accorded her. She was not conceited or complacent. On the contrary she gave frequent humble thanks for Charles's discrimination in giving her a position so suited to her powers. And if she was sometimes rather wistfully conscious that together they had never reached the wild summits of emotional experience, she was fair-minded enough to conclude that for the scholar and for such as herself gentle slopes and cultivated lawns were more suitable.

The earrings secured, she found a clean handkerchief for her bag and turned back towards the dressing-room. Poor Charles! He was going to have a trying week-end. The half-term festivities were always arduous for the Headmaster, in the summer more so than in either of the winter terms. But this year matters had been aggravated by a compulsory change of programme. Mr. Thorpe, the assistant master who always devised a clever variant of some classic for presentation by the boys, had tiresomely allowed his appendix to get the better of him during the Easter holidays. He had fallen into the hands of a surgeon, and would not be released for work until after the summer holidays. Consequently an assistant master had had to found at the very last moment. Suitable young men are not readily available in the last week of the Easter holidays. Either they are still at the University and going up for the Summer, or they have provided for their future some weeks earlier. In the end a temporary master had been secured through an agency. He was middle-aged, morose, and competent. He had spent seven years being a temporary master at prep schools all over the country. Mr. Redesdale found him no trouble to work with but very difficult to talk to, and Judith felt unaccountably sorry for him and avoided him in consequence. If it had not been for the half-term entertainment his negative virtues would have been forgiven him. But to everyone's disgust, though engaged to teach English and History, he refused

point-blank to continue the production of *Julius Caesar* set in train by Mr. Thorpe during the Spring Term. As none of the other masters felt equal to it, and the parents must at all costs be entertained on the first evening of the holiday, the school play was abandoned, and a company of professionals, whose work was given exclusively to schools, was engaged to present *Twelfth Night* instead.

All this was very worrying and upsetting for Charles. Mr. Thorpe, with the help of a few other members of the staff and of the school sergeant, had been accustomed to take Friday evening entirely off his hands. Now there was this invasion by a host of strangers, the school stage was being turned upside down and inside out, dressing-rooms had had to be improvised in the boot-room and the school museum, a host of minor problems had arisen and, since they were new ones, had been referred to Charles.

"Ready, darling?"

"Quite ready, Charles. I thought I would go down and hold the fort. Jill and David are sure to be punctual and I told Hugh and Margaret we would not wait dinner for them if they were late."

"Don't wait for me either. I must go along to the Hall and see how these people are managing."

"Shakespeare Players Limited you mean? I'd leave them to it. After all it's their job to fit themselves on to any stage, any school stage at that."

"I know. But they haven't left themselves too much time, arriving when they did."

Judith took her husband's arm and led him to the stairs.

"Be thankful they are here at all. I was quite prepared for a telegram at the last minute to say their lorry with the properties had broken down and they couldn't perform. Weren't you?"

Charles Redesdale nodded gloomily.

"I hope their script's all right for this audience. I haven't had time to look at it. Think I'd better find their Sir Toby and give him a word of warning."

They parted at the foot of the stairs and went their several ways, Mr. Redesdale in the direction of the school Hall where a noise of hammering showed that the Shakespeare Players Ltd. were feverishly at work, and Mrs. Redesdale towards her drawing-room, there to await her guests.

Behind the green baize door that separated the Headmaster's rooms from the school dormitories there was a hum of conversation and concentrated effort. The school was changing for the entertainment into its Eton suit.

Small boys, absorbed in the recent events of the day, stood chattering together, trousers dangling from their hands while they discussed these important matters, until, recalled to a remembrance of the future by their

dormitory captains, they hurriedly thrust spare or chubby legs into the neglected garments and dragged them into place. The bony weather-beaten knees disappeared behind decorous stripes, the high-water mark at the wrist was covered by smooth black cloth, the unfledged neck was encircled by stiff spotless linen. The gang of shock-headed grey-suited toughs of the morning was replaced by a party of young gentlemen, the most uncouth acquiring a neat dignity, the handsome child breath-taking in his false aura of celestial goodness and beauty.

Alastair Wintringham dipped his brushes into the water jug on the wash-stand that he shared with Bruce Pritchard, shook the water off them on to the stooping form of Coker Minimus, and applied them to the front of his hair. Coker squealed a faint protest as the cold water flicked the back of his neck, but realizing that he was behind with his dressing, continued to search for his missing stud.

"You'd better buck up or you'll be late," Alastair warned him.

"Are your people coming to-night, Coker? I've got a spare back stud if you want one."

"Oh, thanks. Yes, I think so. I know they're coming for the match to-morrow. My father's playing."

"Don't be an idiot. I know he's playing. He's captain of the Fathers like last year. Is your father playing, Wintringham?"

"I expect so. And he's coming to-night, and my uncle."

Bruce Pritchard turned eagerly.

"The detective?"

"Well, he's a doctor really. He only detects as a hobby."

Several boys gathered round Wintringham. His Uncle David was a never-failing draw.

"How does he start detecting? I mean, you don't often get murders. We've never had one at the village I live at."

"There are a lot of murders that aren't found out."

"Do you mean murders that they don't find the murderer, or people being killed to look as if they'd died ordinarily?"

"If I wanted to kill, a person I'd— "

"Shut up! How does your uncle get his cases, Wintringham?"

Alastair did not quite know what to say. The truth was that his parents always refused him details of his uncle's exploits in the criminal world. Hitherto he had managed to be vague on the subject, but with Uncle David actually coming to the entertainment he felt that he must give some show of knowledge.

"Usually I think he just finds a body or something. I know he found a man dead on a beach once when he was bathing."

"Gosh! That would give you a shock. Did he find the murderer?"

"Oh, yes. Sure to have."

"Was he hung?"

"I expect so. I say, *buck up*, Coker! You're always late. Can't you tie a tie, *yet*."

A bell clanged below. There was a banging open of doors and a clatter of feet on wooden-floored passages.

"There, I knew you'd be late. Come here, I'll do it. Now you jolly well learn to do it yourself before Sunday. You manage it all right on week-days."

The youngest Coker, not quite nine years old, nodded his scarlet face. He would have liked to explain that it was the stiff Eton collar that made the black tie so unmanageable, but he did not dare to answer back so high an authority as his dormitory captain, a prefect and member of the First Eleven. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and followed Wintringham downstairs. Soon he was with his own set, chattering and shoving and laughing as busily as ever.

Shakespeare Players Ltd. were accustomed to hardship and unremitting toil. When they talked to professional colleagues who were complaining about the poky dressing-rooms and obsolete machinery of provincial theatres they would laugh harshly, remembering schools where there was no stage at all, and others where there was no dressing-room, only a system of offstage screens. Then they would remind the grumblers that after all they had only to act, whereas they themselves not only managed their own transport, but fixed their own scenery, arranged their own props, set up their own lights and made up in whatever hole or corner could be spared to them. In addition to this the audiences could be relied upon to miss all the authentic jokes and to laugh in the most unexpected places.

A dog's life, thought Robert Fenton, propping up a mirror on one of the museum cases, down which it showed an obstinate tendency to slide. What a stage! Not so bad as the girls' school of yesterday afternoon, where there was only one real exit, and most of the cast had played sardines behind the screens on the other side of the stage, but all the same, with four squeaky boards, what a stage! And it would be a hot night. It always was when he was playing Sir Toby Belch, swathed in padding to increase his girth. What about the old blood-pressure? Well, what about it? He looked at his face, sweating under the grease-paint, though as yet he had on nothing but Sir Toby's breeches and stockings and buckled shoes. A hell of a life! He could act this crowd of suckers into a cocked hat, by God, he could—including young Gash, who thought such a lot of himself. But no-one wanted honest-to-God acting these days ; they called it "ham." He couldn't stick modern stuff—what Gash called "realism."

He swung round on his stool, looking for the object of his critical dislike. There he was, dressed first as usual, leaning up against the wall, talking quietly to Nigel Trent.

"Oi! You—Edward!" he called. "Why don't you do something useful if you're ready? Go and help George."

"He doesn't want any help. He's nearly through."

"You went and asked him, I suppose?"

"I did."

"Can't say I saw you."

"Very probably not. You don't often see anything you're not looking for, do you?"

Gash was still leaning against the wall, still looking down at Nigel Trent's unbelievably handsome face, but his voice, though quiet, held a note of insolent contempt that brought Fenton to his feet trembling with rage.

The rest of the cast paused in their dressing to watch the scene. These rows between Fenton and Gash were getting beyond a joke. Old Fenton fancied himself as an actor, was in fact more experienced than the rest of them, but no one in his senses could deny that Edward Gash had the goods. Probably the old man knew it; that was why he had his knife into him. Sooner or later the mine was going up.

But not this time. George Lemming, the electrician and stage-manager, the man who held the company together and brought it through its worst storms, hurried into the dressing-room. Fenton turned to him, relieved at having the chance to end a skirmish that was not going in his favour.

"O.K., George?"

"O.K." Lemming's quick eye took in the not unfamiliar situation. "Be a good boy, Edward, and run over the props on the stage. They're all there, but they aren't sorted out."

"Right."

Young Gash heaved himself away from the wall. Unfortunately his exaggerated nonchalance disturbed the rather insecure fastenings of a group of primitive weapons that hung there. They broke loose and fell with a clatter to the floor.

"You'll get a hundred lines for that, Edward."

"Gash, you can come to may study in an hour's taime!"

"Oh boy, some toothpick!"

Lionel Bassett, the straight yellow locks of Sir Andrew Aguecheek's wig hanging about his face, swooped awkwardly to the floor. As he straightened up he brandished a spearhead in his large bony hand exclaiming with fatuous intensity, "Is this a dagger which I see before me?"

The company froze. In the shocked silence that greeted this inexcusable breach of the most elementary dressing-room rule, all other differences were buried.

"You bloody idiot!" hissed Fenton, when he was able to speak. "You've probably wrecked the rest of the tour. Get out unless you want me to kick you out."

Gash took the discomfited Bassett by the arm.

"I'm not superstitious myself," he said coldly, "I leave it to the older generation. But I believe in tact. You'd better come and help me on the stage, you poor sap."

As the museum door closed behind them there was a general gasp of indignation. George Lemming patted Fenton on the shoulder.

"Don't throw a fit, old boy. He isn't worth it."

"I'd like to wring his neck, and Gash with him."

A middle-aged stocky man, doubling Antonio and Valentine, said angrily, "Why don't you report him to Dewhurst?"

"Gash, you mean?"

"Sure. Lionel probably didn't know it was bad luck to quote Macbeth in the dressing-room. He's all kinds of a fool."

A young man who had watched the scene in silence broke in. "I don't know so much about that. What about that watch of mine and— "

"Shut up!" George Lemming, half-enveloped in Feste's motley, spoke severely. "You've no right to talk scandal when you've no evidence. I know it's unpleasant, but we're not the first company it's happened to. Bob's an old hand and he's got his eyes open, haven't you, Bob?"

"Of course. But it's more Dewhurst's business than mine."

"Have you told him?"

"Naturally—when Sidney's watch went and Joan mislaid her ring. But you know what it is. He says it must be stopped, but he isn't on the spot himself, and I—well, I don't fancy myself as a spy."

The rest of the players looked uncomfortable. For the whole of that summer season they had suffered from a common enough misfortune of touring companies, a thief in their midst. Actors playing costume parts cannot wear modern watches and have not always pockets in their stage dress for their notebooks, cigarette cases, and other valuables. They must leave them with their clothes in the dressing-rooms or take careful steps to lock them up in suitable bags and hide the keys. Such elaborate precautions are not easily undertaken by a set of people so temperamentally unfitted for careful foresight as the acting community. So they suffered and grumbled and suspected one another, until their natural dislike and distrust of Lionel Bassett, with his ungainly angular form and eccentric ideas, turned him into a natural scapegoat

upon whom their suspicions lighted and were discussed with growing frankness.

Especially so since their General Manager, Cyril Dewhurst, who ran two other companies besides their own, and was seldom with them more than once a week to hand out salaries and perhaps watch a performance, had pronounced himself unable to cope with the pest unless definite evidence was placed before him.

Mr. Warwick, the mathematics master, put his head in through the museum door.

"It's five to eight," he said apologetically. "The parents are all in the hall. Will you be ready at eight? I want to get the boys in now if you will be."

Fenton heaved his augmented figure off the stool on which he sat, carefully wiping free from grease-paint the area to which his false beard was to be gummed.

"We are at your service," he cried with an elaborate gesture, and added as an afterthought, "Did you look in and see if the girls were dressed?"

"No, I didn't." Mr. Warwick's voice was distant.

"Ah well, I'll go myself. George, get the beginners together."

Mr. Warwick brightened.

"Then I can tell Miss Amery to start playing the overture?"

Fenton nodded and young Mr. Warwick hurried back to the Hall to signal to the pianist. Mr. Lawes, the French master, was holding in check, at the door of the Hall, those members of the school who were not already seated with visiting parents in the body of it. He also picked up Warwick's signal and released his charges, who swarmed to the front and disposed themselves on lines of low benches. The school domestic staff, together with a few visiting chauffeurs, filed into seats at the back.

The girls were ready, in fact waiting at the side of the stage, where Fenton, after looking into their empty dressing-room, found them.

"All right, dear?" he asked his wife.

"Well, if you can call grubbing about in a two-foot square box full of filthy cricket shoes all right, yes, we are. But don't ask me what's happened to my hair, because I just don't know, not having seen it at all with the window the size of a postage stamp, and the light, away up in the ceiling and one candle-power at that."

"You should have had the door open, and let the daylight in that way. I expect they never shut it as a rule. You needn't worry about your hair, darling —it's lovely. You know I always like you best as Olivia."

The two girls who were taking the parts of Viola and Maria raised their eyebrows and moved away. Bob was nuts about his wife, the spiteful little cat. She gave them pretty good hell when she felt inclined, and she wasn't all that

good, either. When they'd got her experience…

Bob Fenton drew his wife to one side. In the rising and falling din of conversation from the Hall and the tinkling of the school piano he could not be overheard.

"Feeling O.K. now, dear?"

"What do you mean?"

"That turn you had when we got here. It put the wind up me; I thought you were going to faint."

A wary look came into Sonia Fenton's eyes.

"It was nothing. You fuss over me like an old hen, Bob."

"It was *not* nothing. You were all right in the car. It was when we got inside the door of the school. You were laughing with Hilary one minute. Then I turned round and you were all struck of a heap; looked as if you'd seen a ghost."

Her lips were stiff as she answered, "Nonsense, Bob, you're imagining the whole thing."

George Lemming, his hand hovering over the switchboard of the lights, raised his other arm to attract Fenton's attention. The latter signalled back, "Right, George— footlights."

The audience gasped with excitement, clapped, and. burst into louder conversation. The pianist changed her rather aimless arpeggios for a sixteenth-century jig.

Ruth Fawcett, the under-matron, hurried downstairs and along the corridor to the Hall. She had been kept late attending to various minor matters in connection with clothes and mending. She had changed at furious speed into a silk afternoon frock and combed up the pretty fair curls on her forehead in reckless haste. She knew that her effort was perfunctory; that compared with the carefully-chosen dinner gowns of the mothers her little afternoon frock made no more impression than her uniform. Also that the uniform suited her and showed her colouring to its best advantage. Nevertheless she had risked being late for the sake of appearing for once herself, unprofessional, freed from the badge of office.

As she darted, panting a little, towards the door of the Hall, she thought bitterly that he who was the whole cause of her lateness would most probably notice nothing different in her appearance. He was so maddeningly intent upon his job, so utterly unaware that when he consulted her about matters connected with the boys his words went into her brain while the rest of her drew apart and worshipped. On the rare occasions when they engaged in talk of an unprofessional kind he was unfailingly interesting; and she, who often found herself at a loss for words, found her thoughts expressing themselves without effort. He seemed to enjoy her company while he was with her, but he never made any effort to seek her out. He was hopeless, she decided, and

herself a fool.

As she reached the Hall door, which was open, she collided with someone coming out of a nearby class-room. The force of the impact threw her sideways and she would have fallen against the wall of the corridor had she not been caught and held by a strong arm.

"I'm frightfully sorry. You were coming at such a pace— "

"I thought I was late."

"I do hope I didn't hurt you."

She felt stupid and shaken. It would be he; this was typical of what always happened to her. She said angrily, "Of course you didn't. Anyway it was entirely my own fault. But I didn't want to be late."

"You won't be. The boys have only just gone in and Mr. Redesdale isn't here yet."

He smiled his usual charming smile; she felt exasperated beyond endurance.

"Well, that's something. I don't mind being battered, but to be late as well would be a little hard."

He drew aside to let her pass in first and when he followed paused beside her only long enough to find the whereabouts of the other junior masters before he left her to join them. He was ready to admit that he had been a clumsy idiot, but she need not have snapped back quite so ferociously. However, she couldn't be expected to know the state of his feelings about her, and she quite obviously disliked him. So that was that, and would probably continue to be so.

Ruth Fawcett watched him go before she retired to a bench at the back of the Hall and sat down. The stage curtains blurred before her eyes, but she blinked indignantly and forced the tears away.

There was a disturbance above the footlights in the folds of the curtain, and an eye became visible, peering out over the audience. It was greeted by the school with cheers and laughter and more clapping. All heads turned towards the door, looking for the arrival of Mr. Redesdale to signal the players to begin.

The Masters' Common Room held only one occupant. He pulled an armchair over to the open window, for the night was hot, and settled himself into it with luxurious deliberation. He had done his part in welcoming parents and showing them into suitable seats in the Hall. No more would now be arriving, the boys were safely in, the domestic staff had filed into the back benches. He did not feel called upon to endure a spectacle that to him was anything but entertainment. He had never enjoyed seeing plays performed, and though he felt obliged to see school productions acted by the boys themselves, he felt that he might justifiably refrain from watching professionals of dubious talent.

He opened his book to find the place, then laid it face down on his knee while he lit a pipe. A faint cool breeze moved the curtains at the window and blew his tobacco smoke towards the half-open door. He looked out over the drive with its parked cars to the playing-fields beyond. A high straight cloud hanging in the blue east above the trees at the margin of the field changed from gold to pink and faded to grey. How much better to be here than crowded into the stuffy darkened Hall under the hot electric light with sixty excited children and some forty overheated adults.

Footsteps paused outside the room and the door was pushed open. Mr. Redesdale's pleasant voice said "Thought I smelt tobacco. Cranston, this is Mr. Dewhurst, whose company—I should say one of whose companies—is entertaining us to-night. Mr. Cranston is our padre," he explained to the man beside him. "He also contrives to get the elements of Latin into the heads of the very young."

Cranston got up with a rueful smile.

"You've caught me shirking, I'm afraid. Theatricals are not much in my line."

He shook hands with the manager, his views on theatre life confirmed by the hard-bitten face and solid figure before him, all his prejudices crying out at the sight of a too-wide black tie, a diamond stud and an embossed gold signet ring.

"I think you ought to patronize this one," said Mr. Redesdale, "but I expect you're working."

"You certainly must give us the once-over," added Dewhurst with professional heartiness. "I'ld be very glad of your opinion of the show as a whole, especially as I produce the plays myself. We value the scholastic point of view very greatly, especially on Shakespeare."

"I thought you only did Shakespeare."

"Well, no. Training Colleges and so on prefer Shaw. We generally put on three Shakespeare and two Shaw a season."

Mr. Redesdale looked at his watch.

"Time we were in the Hall," he said, and glanced at Cranston, who stood irresolute. "Coming, Cranston?"

"I'll come along after the interval if you don't mind."

The Headmaster led the way out and Cranston was once more alone. But his former peace was gone. His book had slipped to the floor, his pipe was out, the sky over the garden had deepened to a dull grey-blue. Why should he see this play? Anything connected with the unpleasant bounder to whom he had just been introduced was certain to be bad. What play were they doing, anyway?

He remembered that there had been a playbill in the Common Room

announcing the production. He had not bothered to look at it when the other masters were passing it round, but he supposed it was there somewhere.

He looked for it on the table and on the mantelpiece, but failed to find it. A brief search of other likely places disclosed its whereabouts in the receptacle to which he would himself have consigned it—the wastepaper basket. He smoothed it out and looked at it. *Twelfth Night* was announced: the Shakespeare Players Ltd. in their eighth summer season to schools and colleges. Below was a list of the cast, headed by Robert and Sonia Fenton, whose names in large capitals stood beneath photographs of them in ordinary dress.

Mr. Cranston studied these portraits with distaste. He did not admire their features nor their expressions, and moreover they were marred by two lines drawn in red ink across each face from forehead to chin. Obviously someone trying out a pen before correcting an exercise; an unsatisfactory pen too, because the nib had parted in places, making two parallel lines that had bitten deep into the paper.

Mr. Cranston sighed. *Twelfth Night*, was it? Well, he would put in an appearance after the interval. In the meantime—peace.

He pushed the playbill absent-mindedly into his pocket, found his place in his book, laid it face downwards on his knee, and relit his pipe.

CHAPTER II

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The curtain fell for the first interval, the lights went up, and the audience, according to established custom, rose and trooped out of the side door of the Hall into the Headmaster's garden. Mothers fanned themselves with their programmes while fathers mopped their foreheads and sons stretched sticky necks away from clinging Eton collars.

The two Wintringham brothers, followed by their wives and Alastair, drew off from the main crowd and walked slowly down a grass path between rose-bushes.

"How long are you staying at your mother's?" asked Margaret presently.

"Only till Monday," answered Jill. "We have already deserted David for a fortnight; he's beginning to be fretful about it. And Nanny finds the country very boring. She says she can't get any decent walks, which is true in a way because the roads are very harassing when you've got a pram and someone as erratic and energetic as young Nicholas walking beside it. The footpaths across the fields are worse because the pram won't go over the stiles."

"What about the garden?"

"Well, my dear, the garden would be lovely if it were my own garden, but what with Mother's ducklings— Nicholas *will* pick them up by their necks because their feet are scratchy, he says—and Daddy's carnations, and the lily pond… Susan fell in again to-day. The water only comes up to her ankles, but she always seems to sit into it backwards, and the mud is that good green variety that doesn't wash out."

The men had paused at the end of the walk and were looking up at the sky.

"They're wondering if it will be fine for the match to-morrow," said Margaret. "Hugh has consented to play. Don't you think that's wonderful? Is David playing?"

"No, of course not. He can't play till Nicholas comes to the school."

"That's a pity, isn't it? Mr. Coker was lamenting to your sister about the Fathers' prospects this year. He said he wasn't sure yet if he'd scraped a whole team together."

"Oh, he'll manage it. Hugh, has Mr. Coker got his team for to-morrow?"

"Don't think so. He's over there now, hard at work recruiting. Look at him, poor devil. Alastair, who's he talking to?"

"Well, I don't know. It might be Flinders-Crawford's father. That's

Flinders-Crawford standing beside him."

This was a very small boy with light primrose hair. His mother was finding the evening rather a trial. The Hall was too hot; the chairs were so different from the stalls to which she was accustomed; the hotel two miles from the school was very primitive. But Tuppy said they must come, so here they were. And now they had roped in poor Tuppy to play cricket.

"I didn't know you played cricket, darling."

"I don't. But they're two men short, and naturally I played at school."

"Do I have to sit and watch you play?"

Colonel Flinders-Crawford looked surprised.

"Would you like that, darling?"

"Like seeing you make a fool of yourself? Of course not. Oh, Tuppy, look! What a figure! No, the one in blue. It *would* be light blue. Do you know, besides myself there are only two really well-dressed women in the whole outfit—Mrs. Redesdale and her sister."

"I think they all look thoroughly nice women."

"That's what I said. Nice is exactly— "

"Look out!"

Mr. Redesdale drifted up to them.

"Hope the evening is not too hot for you. Your boy has made a very good start, Mrs. Crawford. I shall be moving him up next term, I hope. "

Mrs. Coker, the lady in pale blue who had provided Mrs. Flinders-Crawford with so much merriment, stood surrounded by her three adoring sons. While confident of the ability of the school to produce first-rate theatrical entertainment, they were not so sure of the merits of this imported company. Nevertheless, since the school was responsible for it, they felt that it must at all costs be praised.

"Sir Toby is very good, isn't he, Mummy?"

"I think Sir Andrew is funnier, don't you, Mummy? When his hair gets in his eyes. Is it a wig?"

"Of course it's a wig. He wouldn't have hair that long. Mummy, don't you think Sir Toby is the best actor?"

"I think it's rather silly they don't see that Viola is a girl. She doesn't look like a man at all, and her voice would definitely give her away—definitely."

"Don't be an idiot. It's a play. People never see anything in plays, or hear what other people say when they aren't meant to. It isn't meant to be real, is it, Mummy?"

Mrs. Coker considered. "I expect it didn't seem so silly when boys acted the women's parts," she suggested. "There weren't actresses when *Twelfth Night* was first done."

"Oh, I see. That would make a difference."

"Mummy!" Coker Minimus, who had not followed the conversation, pulled his mother's sleeve. "Mummy, Daddy's talking to the detective."

"What?" Mrs. Coker followed the direction of her son's waving arm before putting it down. The eldest boy explained.

"It's Wintringham's uncle. Not the one next to Daddy, the tallest one on the other side."

"He finds dead bodies," cried Coker Minimus in a shrill carrying voice, "Wintringham said so. Just lying about, and then he finds out who did it."

"Shut up, you fool!" growled the middle Coker, for eyes were turning in their direction.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Jill to David. "Your fame has gone before you."

"I'll wring young Alastair's neck."

"No, don't do that. Come and talk to Miss Fawcett. Mr. Hill has just left her to speak to some parents, and she looks as if the end of the world had come."

"Indeed?"

"Now don't pretend I haven't told you. Judith says the engagement has been imminent for two terms now, and it's getting on her nerves. But she thinks it'll need an earthquake to shake them into it."

"I expect you and Judith are imagining the whole thing."

"Really? Well, I'm ready to bet you five bob it comes off before the summer holidays."

"Provided we have an earthquake?"

"Naturally."

"Darling nitwit!"

"Same to you."

"Miss Fawcett's gone. Everyone's going. Come on, Jill, we're in the middle of a row. I hate treading on feet."

"There's no need to. I'm looking for Margaret and Hugh. Oh, there they are!"

During the first interval the cast also took the air, standing about in groups of two and three near the door that led into the hall beside the stage. The heat inside, on a small stage surrounded by powerful arc-lights, had been almost unbearable. They felt limp and exhausted and disinclined even for the usual bickering about the performance. Mr. Warwick, who had followed them out to see if they wanted anything he could supply, was discouraged by their gloomy faces and short answers, and presently left them, going down the back drive

and round the corner of the museum on his way to the garden, where the audience was more amiably engaged.

As he passed out of sight of the stage door he came upon Sonia Fenton and Nigel Trent in earnest conversation. They did not look at him as he passed and he continued on his way, deciding that since these rather curious people had obviously no need of his services, he would join the audience for the rest of the programme and leave them to their own devices. Any suggestions he had made from his memory of the absent Mr. Thorpe's use of the stage had been turned down with smiles and raised eyebrows. Let them get on with it then, and be damned to them.

When he was out of sight Sonia returned her cheek to Nigel's jewelled tunic. She murmured, "It was that master, wasn't it? Did he see us?"

"He saw us, but being a perfect little gentleman, that is all he did see."

She looked up into his mocking eyes and her heart sank. She had no weapons against his kind charming indifference, She shivered, turning away abruptly.

"We'd better go back to the others," she said crossly, "Dewhurst was in front. Did you see him?"

"Can't say I did. I never see the audience except as a blur. I'm too terrified of drying up."

"You *are* a baby, darling. And such a sweet one."

Her big brown eyes turned up to his startlingly blue ones, but there was no comfort for her there, only a peaceful blankness. He changed the subject.

"Will the ghost walk to-night, then?"

"It damned well ought to. You bet Dewhurst has eased his cheque out of the Headmaster by this time."

They turned the corner of the museum wall and found that their hopes were fulfilled. The ghost had walked; in other words the salaries had just been distributed. Dewhurst, with the cast gathered about him, was giving them a few words of admonition and encouragement. He waved two pay-envelopes at the stragglers.

"Come on, children, you're late for the treasure-hunt. Nigel, you look like Prince Florizel, but you speak like a kitchenmaid with laryngitis. Get your words out, boy. If you can't fill this little school hall what will you do at Drury Lane? Sonia, you're lovely, dear, as usual, but do remember the point of your part is you're *not* attracted to Orsino and never will be. You're a little inclined to suggest you're only waiting for a bit of cave-man stuff to fall into his arms."

Sonia bit her lip and the other ladies of the cast tittered. Fenton's face darkened, but as Nigel's frank gaze met his scowling glance he dropped his eyes. Nigel sighed. This was another penalty of possessing such a ridiculously

beautiful face. Aesthetically he was proud of it, but he was not vain, and he realized that it was a handicap in many ways, and in some a definite embarrassment. It had such a monotonous success with women. They fell in love with him if he was friendly to them; if he was cold and distant their passion knew no bounds. And he was naturally of a kindly disposition. He liked people to be happy. But the more you gave women the more they wanted. He had been forced in self-defence to develop the technique that so baffled and enraged Sonia Fenton. He did not realize what he was doing to her; it never once occurred to him that a woman of her age—she must be at least thirty-six—could be serious about him, who was not quite twenty-two. Still less that she could expect him to be serious about her.

He made a suitably respectful answer to Dewhurst's criticism and took his envelope away to the museum to put it with his clothes.

Fenton caught his wife by the elbow and marched her a few paces away. It was obvious to all that their whispered conversation was not of an amicable nature.

Dewhurst remained where he was, chatting with the stage-manager.

"You know, George, I rely on you a great deal, a very great deal. You've got a head on your shoulders, which Bob hasn't. Of course as leading man I put the company into his hands. When you're on the road and I'm not there, it has to be like that. But I'd like you to feel you can consult me—apart from Bob—if you want to."

George Lemming considered this. Then he said, "I'd rather not go behind Bob's back. He has a temper, but it doesn't mean anything. Some of the others get up against him, but that's because they don't know him, and don't make allowances."

"I am not suggesting that you should go behind Bob's back. I only mean that there may be things you want discussed that Bob doesn't think sufficiently important. Well, if that's the case, you can bring them direct to me."

"I see." Lemming paused and then went on, "Bob's told you about our recent troubles in the company, hasn't he?"

"You mean the thefts? Yes. But it's difficult for me to act. You'll have to get more evidence."

"I didn't mean the thefts, as it happens, though they make things bloody uncomfortable. I meant Edward. He's up against Bob every minute of the time. There's going to be a big row one of these days if something isn't done."

"What do you suggest?"

"Move him to another company. He has the makings of a fine actor, but this friction is damned bad for him. Put him where he can get the maximum of experience and development and he'll be good publicity for you some day."

"M-m. I'll think it over. Thanks for the tip. Actually I'm more worried about the effect of these thefts. Bob thinks it's that raw-boned fellow, Bassett, doesn't he?"

"Bob doesn't think anything yet; the others mostly think it's Bassett."

"And you?"

"I'm like Bob: I don't think anything yet."

His shrewd eyes met the manager's unwaveringly, and Dewhurst said good-bye to him and walked away, giving a final pat on the shoulders to the two Fentons and a wave of the hand to the others.

"I'm off in the next interval," he called to them. "Shan't see you again till Wednesday. Newbury, isn't it? See you then. Ta-ta, be good boys and girls!"

Mr. Cranston put away his book with reluctance and knocked out his pipe. It was getting too dark to read, and he had promised to see the end of the play. So he must not put on the light and start another chapter. And yet how much more refreshing than Shakespeare mauled would be another chapter of Gibbon. His history might not be above criticism, but his full satisfying prose was a delight, giving weight and dignity to facts, even though erroneous, and to irony the glittering sharpness of a Vandal spear-head.

Leaving the Masters' Common Room Mr. Cranston went out into the corridor and stood at one of its windows looking over the Headmaster's garden, into which the parents were passing for the second interval. The evening was growing cooler, so that they no longer stood in groups, but to ward off possible chills moved about, their small sons following and dodging to and fro as they moved along the congested garden paths. The mothers now had on their wraps, and some of them, after a single turn round the garden, insisted upon returning to the stuffy atmosphere of the Hall.

Mr. Cranston considered whether it was his duty to join them, but his conscience was half-hearted in its work, and as the company in the garden continued to diminish, he determined that he would not go out, but would wait until a general retreat announced the end of the interval.

He had hardly reached this decision when the unwelcome voice of the manager made him turn round.

"Pardon me, but what did you think of our little show after all?"

Mr. Cranston hated to appear rude, but he was a truthful man.

"I'm afraid I haven't been in yet. But I am going to see the last part."

"Good man—good man. I know you'll like it. Our leading man, Fenton, really *is* good. Only his temperament kept him off the London stage. Could have had any part he liked fifteen years ago, but no control over his temper — very unfortunate—dished him with managers, of course. But damned lucky for me, I always say. I consider this my best company, simply because Fenton

is in it. Well, I must not linger. I'm just off to Eastbourne—my second company is playing there to-morrow afternoon. Then up to Reading to the third company and on to Newbury —a dog's life, believe me! I envy you scholastic people in these peaceful surroundings, I do indeed."

"We have our occasional trials," said Mr. Cranston drily; but he shook hands with a good grace and walked with the manager as far as the front door, where he stood on the steps watching him start his car.

When he had driven away down the drive Cranston turned to go in and was very nearly hurled backwards to the gravel by the impetuous egress of the temporary master, Mr. Schofield. The latter pulled up short and apologized in a low surly voice. "It's all right," replied Mr. Cranston mildly, and added with mock severity, "Are you a deserter, too?"

"What?"

Mr. Schofield stood as if struck into stone, his face suddenly white and twisted, his eyes glaring furiously at his colleague. Mr. Cranston, though severely startled, explained. "I meant that I have avoided being present at the entertainment up to now, and I thought perhaps you had done the same. But I am yielding to pressure and am about to see the end of it, so perhaps you will come in with me?"

"No." Mr. Schofield's answer seemed to explode from some deep-seated disturbance within him. "I won't see any of it—any of it."

He ran down the steps and hurried away in the direction of the playing-field.

Mr. Cranston stared after him in amazement. What a queer chap he was, with his moods and silences, and now this outburst. Was he ill, or habitually unbalanced? Anyway, not a very suitable person for having charge of the young.

As he walked slowly towards the hall Mr. Cranston lamented, not for the first time, the absence of young Mr. Thorpe, and the irresponsible and unjust way in which appendicitis was distributed to the children of men.

The play wound on into confusion and thence to its unravelling. The Duke at last began to tire of his hopeless pursuit of Olivia, and Viola and the newly-arrived Sebastian put everyone in a welter of misunderstanding. Sir Andrew and Sir Toby had the worst of it, and staggered on and off to the delight of the school, with blood-stained bandages round their heads, holding one another up and missing various obstacles in their path with drunken precision. Sebastian entered and confounded the Court, Olivia discovered herself married to a stranger, but accepted the substitution with little comment. Malvolio was humiliated, the Duke consoled himself with Viola. Finally the Clown was left alone on the stage, singing, in George Lemming's pleasant tenor, about the wind and the rain. The curtain fell, and the school broke into

tumultuous applause.

After the third curtain-call the lights in the Hall went up, and the audience rose to the strains of "God Save the King." The parents and their sons, guided by the assistant masters, began to stream out of their seats towards the door, while the rest of the school, standing by their benches at the front, waited for them to go.

Mr. Redesdale and his party also waited in order to bring up the rear, and Mr. Warwick, making his way up to him against the stream, asked where the cast were to go for refreshment, and disappeared on to the stage with his message. The school began to chatter in low voices.

"I say, Pritchard, wasn't Sir Toby good? He was much the best."

"Yes, he was. Why didn't he come on at the end?"

"When do you mean?"

"For the curtain-calls."

"Didn't he? I didn't notice. Did you notice, Reeve?"

"Notice what?"

"Pritchard says Sir Toby didn't come on for the curtain-calls."

"I wasn't looking. Coker Major kicked my ankle, clapping.'"

"Howard, did you see if Sir Toby was on for the curtain-calls?… I say, Howard!"

"What?"

"Was Sir Toby on for the curtain-calls?"

"No."

"I'll ask Bonzo. Bonzo, was Sir Toby on at the end, for the curtain-calls?"

"I don't remember. No, I don't think he was."

"I'm sure he wasn't, because I looked for him specially. I wonder why not."

Mr. Hill and Mr. Lawes, in the intervals of urging parents forward towards the Headmaster's drawing-room where food awaited them, exchanged comments on the performance.

"Not too bad, considering."

"No, it might have been worse. The change of lighting in the last scenes was good. And Malvolio could act. I'd rather it had been the school show, though."

"Quite. But it wasn't such a bad substitute. Sir Toby was good, especially when he was drunk. He did it very well, not too far gone—just right, in fact."

"Yes. Odd he should have played that bit so quietly, understatement and all that. His other acting was rather florid, I thought."

"I expect he toned down the drunk part on purpose for the parents. It was

impressed on him that he must take into account both parents and boys and act according."

"Perhaps you're right."

The boys began to troop down the hall following the last of the parents. Mr. Redesdale led his party into the central aisle.

It was at this moment that the agitated face of George Lemming was thrust through the curtains. He pushed them apart and raising his hand called "Please!" in a loud voice.

Everyone still in the hall turned abruptly. George swallowed twice in his agitation.

"If there is a doctor present," he said loudly. "I should be very grateful if he would give me his assistance. One of the cast has been taken seriously ill."

CHAPTER III

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Instinctively David stepped forward. At the same moment a grey-haired man near the door of the hall turned back, and another man disengaged himself from the little knot of people that was just passing out. Seeing one another they all stopped short, looking a trifle foolish and uncertain. Mr. Redesdale took the matter in hand.

"Thank you, Mason," he said to the grey-haired man. "I'd be very much obliged if you'd see to this."

The third volunteer, who was a parent, seeing the situation doubly covered, retreated thankfully to join his wife, who pursed her lips, doubtful whether or not her husband had been slighted. Meanwhile Dr. Mason, who had met David on several previous occasions, seized him by the arm and pushed him towards the stage.

"You'd better come with me," he said, "to see fair play."

David still hesitated, not sure of the correct etiquette for this occasion.

"Yes, go, David!" urged Jill. "And hurry up, both of you. The little man was horribly scared; it may be serious."

"I shall not run," said Dr. Mason, climbing heavily up the insecure steps on to the stage. "Even to impress the parents and staff with my efficiency. The lay public will never learn that a medical emergency does not excite a doctor as it does them, and that a physician breathless and weak with exhaustion is no asset. Your charming and intelligent wife at least should know that."

"She was only trying to stop me from backing out. She knows I'm interested in sudden calamities of whatever nature. But I don't see what I can do here, except hold your stethoscope for you when you aren't using it. That is, if you've got one on you."

"Nonsense. Apart from children's complaints I'm a back number. Haven't time to be anything else. But I *have* got a stethoscope. Matron has a habit of producing a patient for me to see, whatever my purpose is in coming here."

George Lemming darted upon them as they reached the stage and led them down the second set of steps into the open air and so to the museum. As they went in the excited babble of conversation was checked and the group of players, fantastic and incongruous in their stage clothes, broke up to admit them to their stricken leader.

He lay on his back near the show-case on which his own clothes and possessions were piled. He had not started to undress and the wig and beard

were still in place, together with the stage bandage in which he had made his final appearance on the play. It was impossible to determine his colour on account of the grease-paint, but the stertorous breathing and the flaccid condition of his limbs made diagnosis obvious.

Dr. Mason confirmed it with a slow and careful examination. Then he rose to his feet and dusted his knees. Sonia Fenton, who had watched with large frightened eyes, gave a loud sob. "This is his wife," explained George Lemming in a hushed voice. "Mrs. Fenton."

"Thank you." Dr. 'Mason laid a soothing hand on Sonia's arm. "I'm afraid, Mrs. Fenton, that your husband has had a stroke. I cannot tell you at present how serious it will prove to be. He will have to be removed to a nursing home or hospital, of course, and in the meantime we must make him as comfortable as we can where he is. He must not be moved until we can get an ambulance."

At this alarming, though not unexpected verdict, Sonia broke down altogether, and let Hilary Stocton guide her to a chair, where she sat with her face in her hands. Edward Gash, who had watched the scene with a face that grew progressively more and more yellow, said vaguely, "If this goes on I shall be sick." George Lemming pushed him towards the door, but did not wait to see if his threat were to be fulfilled. The others still stood and watched their fallen colleague with alarm, disgust, or concern, according to their former regard for him.

Dr. Mason and David between them removed the padding that constituted Sir Toby's bulky figure, took off the knight's jack boots, and loosened his high-necked coat. They left the beard and wig in place for fear of causing undue movement to his head, and contented themselves with slipping folded coats between him and the floorboards and laying a car rug over him.

"Has he been seeing a doctor lately?" asked Dr. Mason of the company in general.

Sonia raised her head.

"He's had a high blood-pressure for years. The doctor warned him. He wasn't to take alcohol or get excited. But he might just as well have told him to fly to the moon."

"You mean he did not take his doctor's advice?"

"He tried to cut out the drinks, but the other… Well, my husband's temperament is his curse. The rest of them will tell you."

She let her head droop against Hilary's protecting arm. The rest of the cast shuffled their feet uneasily. George Lemming coughed.

"He has a very quick temper, I'm afraid," he said gently. "He gets worked up over things that wouldn't upset a less excitable man."

"And he has been worked up recently?"

"Yes. Yes, he has. Only to-day. But, all the same, he never took things easy—there was always something —to-day was no worse than usual. Sonia has said it; it was temperament."

"I see." Dr. Mason saw that George was reluctant to go into detail before the patient's wife. Well, it was not immediately necessary to have that detail. His next move must be to get the patient away from the school, for it was plain that he could not receive adequate treatment there.

Sonia listened dully to Dr. Mason's careful description of the facilities available, and in the end left all the arrangements in his hands. A journey was inevitable; the sooner the better. She was persuaded to go and change with the help of Hilary and Joan, so that she would be ready, when the ambulance came, to accompany her husband.

David was put in charge of the patient, and Dr. Mason, thankful that the case had, after all, been a simple one, went away to report to the Headmaster and to get into touch with the local Cottage Hospital at Stanhurst, six miles from the school.

The small daughters of the Headmaster were having a grand time. They were free from their usual keeper, who had not yet appeared to take them off to bed, and their parents were far too much occupied with their guests and preoccupied with the unfortunate end to the performance to be able to pay any restrictive attention to them. Slipping quietly and politely past parents who were balancing coffee-cups and glasses as they talked, Hermione and Brenda made their way to the refreshments and for some time gorged in silence. At last Hermione licked her fingers.

"I promised Alastair I'd pinch a few things for him," she whispered. "Go and see if he's outside anywhere."

Her younger sister slid away and came back to report that he was in the offing.

"We'd better not take too much at once. Not those, you fool, the sugar will fall off on the way. I'll go first; you'd better wait till I come back."

She filled her handkerchief with sandwiches and sweet biscuits and holding it down at her side went quietly out into the passage. The door between the school and the Headmaster's rooms was open, also the door of the school dining-room, where the boys were having biscuits and lemonade. Alastair stepped out of the shadows. The treasure was transferred to the pockets of his Eton suit.

"I say, Hermione, have you heard anything yet about the accident?"

"Was it an accident? The man only said one of them was seriously ill."

"He'd have to say that. Have you found out which it was?"

"No, Daddy's been giving the Fathers drinks. I couldn't get near him."

"Well," said Alastair, disregarding this lame explanation, "if you've had enough to eat now you might see if you can find out anything. I hope it wasn't Sir Toby."

"Here's Dr. Mason coming," whispered Hermione hurriedly, "he'll tell Daddy all about it."

She flattened herself against the wall while the doctor passed, and followed him closely into the room. Neither her father nor Dr. Mason noticed her leaning against the bookcase beside them as they discussed the back-stage situation in low tones. When Dr. Mason hurried away to the telephone and Mr. Redesdale turned back to his guests, she was no longer there.

Mr. Coker joined his wife with a smiling face.

"Well, you look as if you'd finished your job," she said comfortably.

"At last. You've no idea what it is, getting the tail of the eleven together."

"Yes, I have. It was just the same last year. You started with the same six enthusiasts, who answered your letter by return, and after that it was a battle of wills. And you won, as I suppose you have now."

"I've got eleven men. I ought to be grateful, I expect. Now it rests with the weather. If we have a soak after all I've done in the last week, I shall refuse to take it on next year."

"You couldn't do that with three boys at the school and your past. Besides, you know you love it. Don't be such a humbug."

They looked at one another affectionately.

"Do I hear you abusing your husband?" said David Wintringham. "Let me get you some more coffee?"

"Thank you so much, Dr. Wintringham. I wasn't abusing him; I was telling him the truth about himself."

"Worse and worse," said David, retiring with the cup. Judith Redesdale moved into the gap made by his departure.

"You certainly mustn't be unkind to him," she said. "He is the keystone of the whole week-end. What would Saturday be without the Fathers' match, and where would the Fathers be without Mr. Coker?"

Mrs. Coker beamed. She was devoted to her husband and her three small sons; praise of any one of them made her supremely happy.

"Tuppy, do look at the fat blue woman," whispered Mrs. Flinders-Crawford to her husband, "Mrs. Redesdale is sucking up to her like anything. She's got three boys here, hasn't she? Quite a litter, these days. I expect that accounts for the special treatment."

Colonel Flinders-Crawford looked uncomfortable. He wondered if this was really the right school for Mark. His wife seemed to dislike the other mothers so much, though he couldn't see what was wrong with them. They were not gay sparks, certainly, but wasn't that just what he and Di had decided was so

right? Di herself had stood out against a snob-school.

Mr. Redesdale made his way to them.

"Have a whisky-and-soda, Crawford? Yes, over there. Help yourself. Mrs. Crawford, have you met Mrs. Billington-Smith? Her boy also was new this term."

Mrs. Flinders-Crawford and Mrs. Billington-Smith offered one another sandwiches, refused for their figures' sakes, and began skirmishing warily.

Outside in the passage Alastair Wintringham waited impatiently. The school was about to go up to bed, and though he had received a second instalment of nourishment from Brenda, there was still no further news of the mishap to the touring company. At last Hermione arrived, rather breathless.

"I couldn't get away. Mummy made me talk to Aunt Jill. She's bringing Nicholas and Susan to the match to-morrow and Bren and I are going to help Nanny look after them. I don't mind Susan, she's rather sweet, but Nicky is awful. He always wants to climb trees, and if we won't let him he yells, and if we do he goes too high and gets stuck. Uncle David had to climb right up a sycamore tree last time to fetch him down and got a bit in his eye because Nicky shook the branch as he was climbing up."

"Sycamore trees are awful that way," agreed Alastair. "Always full of bits."

"So I had to wait," went on Hermione, returning abruptly to her explanation. "But I heard Dr. Mason talking to Daddy. At least I heard a word here and there. It *is* Sir Toby."

"Oh, I say!" Alastair was genuinely concerned.

"Dr. Mason said he was quite unconscious, and I heard something about a blow—at least he said stroke, but it means the same thing."

"It'll be concussion," said Alastair gloomily, speaking from his extensive knowledge of gangster literature. "Who hit him? Did Dr. Mason say?"

"No, he was in a hurry to telephone—for an ambulance to take him to Stanhurst Cottage Hospital."

"I hope he doesn't die. I wonder if it would be manslaughter or murder. I suppose it would depend on the quarrel and if the other man hit him first."

"It would be lovely for Uncle David if it was a murder. I heard your mother say to him he must be getting quite out of practice because he hadn't had a case for so long."

"He could find one any time if he wanted to." Alastair was ready to defend his uncle against all criticism. "He's been doing research; he hasn't had time for detecting."

"But he'd have to do it if it happened here," argued Hermione with feminine realism. "He couldn't help it, could he?"

The school bell rang and the boys went up to bed. Hermione returned to

the drawing-room, which was gradually emptying of its guests.

Meanwhile Brenda, finding her sister's absence tiresome, attached herself to Mr. Cranston, who was standing back against the bookcase, exhausted by a prolonged bout of conversation. He was a particular friend of hers, both he and his sister, who worked as secretary to Mr. Redesdale, and kept house for her brother in a small cottage at the edge of the school grounds. All her life Brenda had been fascinated by this house. Its sitting-room was full of exciting and beautiful things, a collection of china cottages, a collection of china dogs, a live canary in a cage, a collection of old silver spoons, a case with eighteenth-century doll's house furniture, and another with ancient doorknockers. Besides this the walls were hung with samplers which Brenda, when she became old enough, liked to read aloud to Miss Cranston on her visits to her. Mr. Cranston was always kind too, and if the mottoes on the samplers were difficult to read or worked in Latin, he did it for her. He also let her read and translated for her the words on some brass rubbings he had taken from time to time, and kept rolled up in a drawer. The letters were difficult to pick out, but the words, which she did not understand, sounded very magnificent.

"Well, Bren, did you enjoy the play?"

"Not very much. It was rather muddly, wasn't it?"

"I only saw the end."

"That would be worse, I should think. I think Olivia was silly not to marry Orsino. He looked just like a hero, tall and handsome. I think she ought to have married him. She was supposed to be the Princess, wasn't she?"

Mr. Cranston could not argue against this eminently common-sense view of the plot. Shakespeare would have to justify himself to the young lady later, when her views on love were less rigid, and more informed. He changed the subject.

"Like to see my watch?"

"Oo, yes!"

The watch, a gold presentation one, given on the occasion of his twenty-fifth anniversary at the school, was brought out and its back opened.

"Careful, don't break the hinge."

Brenda read the words inscribed on the inside of the cover. Her eyes shone.

"Now let's go and read Great-grandfather's medals. The ones on the mantelpiece. Come on."

They walked over to the fireplace, and Brenda stepped up onto the curb, nearly upsetting the big jug of flowers that stood in front of the empty grate. But there was disappointment in store for her. The open, plush-lined case was there, standing upright behind the clock, but the ancient ancestral gold medals

were not hanging on their accustomed hooks. The case was bare.

"Bother!" said Brenda crossly, "I suppose Daddy's taken them out to show somebody. I wanted you to read me the words on them."

"Another time will do," answered Mr. Cranston mildly. "Look, there's Hermione and someone to take you both off to bed."

Upstairs in the dormitories Matron and Miss Fawcett turned off the lights. The boys had been unusually quiet and quick for the night of an entertainment. They were settling down in record time. But this was not because of any strange co-operative urge or an efflux of natural goodness. It was simply because each boy was stirred and preoccupied by the astounding news spread by Alastair Wintringham that the leading man of the show, their much-admired Sir Toby Belch, had been the victim of a murderous attack, assailant unknown, and that the matter was thrillingly safe in the hands of his uncle, Dr. David Wintringham, the detective.

The actors changed quickly and in silence. They were in no mood for light conversation, and everything of importance had been said. The quietness of the museum was marred only by the heavy breathing of the sick man.

George Lemming, in shirt and trousers, folded up his clown's costume and looked about him.

"I'm going to take down the lights. I suppose we might as well get on with the job of packing up, Doctor?"

David, who was sitting near the patient, looked up. "I imagine so. You belong to a group of companies, don't you? Won't your manager arrange for an understudy to join you?"

"He'll try to. That is, when I can get hold of him. At the moment he's in his car between here and Eastbourne. I don't even know which hotel he's going to, though I can make a pretty good guess."

"Ring all the likely places and leave a message for him to call you here."

"But we can't stop here until he comes through. In the ordinary way we'ld be half packed up by now. We're supposed to be playing in Winchester to-morrow afternoon."

A junior member of the cast called across the room, "Where are we going to-night, George?"

The others stopped packing to listen to the stage-manager's answer. Lemming considered.

"It'll have to be Stanhurst, I think. The old boy's going to be moved there and I'ld like to be around to-morrow morning to see Sonia through in case…"

His voice trailed off and the cast moved uneasily. Lemming squared his shoulders.

"No good thinking too far ahead. As soon as we get to Stanhurst and Bob's been fixed up I'll ring Dewhurst from the pub there. There's no point in doing

it till he's got to Eastbourne—only make a muddle. So come on, boys, get around and clear up. Where's Edward?"

There was instant silence and everyone looked at everyone else. At length Nigel Trent said slowly, "He went out to cat, didn't he? He doesn't seem to have come back. He hasn't changed yet, anyway."

George crossed the room and looked at Gash's clothes, neatly folded on the next case to Trent's. He frowned thoughtfully.

"Poor old Edward! He's too easily upset. It isn't as if he liked Bob. You've got to take the rough with the smooth, in this life, more than most. Well, come on, children!"

They went out to the stage and David heard hammering and thumps and shouted directions. Presently the lorry was started up and backed into position at the side door of the hall. Properties were carried out and loaded.

Sonia Fenton came back into the museum alone and moved reluctantly to her husband's side. She refused a seat, and stood looking down at him with mingled fear and disgust in her strained face. David watched her. It seemed to him that the fear was not on Robert Fenton's behalf, nor the disgust caused altogether by his present unattractive appearance.

The sick man's mouth had fallen open and saliva rolled down into the false hair of his beard. His breathing, which had been regular, though laboured, checked a little and went on with a slightly different rhythm. David frowned: he did not altogether like the look of the man. He pushed aside the car rug and drew out the patient's arm to feel his pulse. As he did so an envelope slipped to the floor beside him. He handed it up to Sonia.

"This seems to have fallen out of his pocket," he said. "You'd better keep it for him."

Sonia replied in a curiously frozen voice.

"This does not belong to my husband. It has George's name on it."

"What's that?"

They had not noticed the return of the stage-manager, but he stood beside them, holding out his hand to Sonia Fenton. In silence she handed him the envelope. He turned it over and over, then dropped it on the case beside his coat, and went through the pockets of that garment.

"It's mine all right," he said slowly. "But I put mine in this coat. It was in Bob's pocket, do you say?"

"It was lying near his coat pocket. I saw it as I picked up his arm. It probably fell out when we were loosening his clothes and covering him up. I didn't notice it then."

"*Bob*?" There was an incredulous note in George's voice. Sonia caught her breath and answered sharply.

"Of course not. Are you *mad*? He must have been keeping it to give back

to you."

"Then he got it from… Then he found out— "

Sonia nodded, her big brown eyes turning from David to the stage-manager and back again.

"Can you tell me what all this is about?" asked David. "Or am I being inquisitive?"

"You might as well know," George answered gloomily. "We've been having petty thefts in the company; it's not unusual. It was worrying Bob."

"I see." David was thoughtful. "It might be as well to find out if the others have still got their envelopes. I take it they had just been distributed to-night."

"That's right. In the first interval. Oi! Who's that?"

A figure was moving quietly out through the doorway. It turned.

"Lionel! What the devil are you doing, creeping in and out like that?"

Bassett came forward awkwardly, his big hands hanging at his sides.

"I wondered if I could start taking out the clothes to load up," he said. "But you seemed to be having a private conversation."

"Private be— " answered George Lemming. "We were wondering how my pay envelope came to be lying in Bob's pocket—the pocket of his costume that he still has on. Perhaps you can tell me that?"

"Me?" gasped Bassett. The colour had drained from his face. He opened and shut his large mouth helplessly.

"Yes, you." George's tone was vicious. "You aren't lucky by nature, are you, Lionel? And you say unlucky things, like quoting Macbeth in here. Well, it seems to have worked. Bob's had a stroke, and the pay envelopes have been dodging about. I'ld have been pretty unlucky myself if Dr. Wintringham hadn't happened to find mine. I've no doubt Bob meant to give it back to me, but where did he get it from? Not my pocket—not Bob. Perhaps *you'ld* care to suggest something."

"Me?" repeated Bassett, in the same helpless manner. "You're wrong," he cried suddenly, his voice breaking as he spoke. " You've all got a down on me, you bloody suspicious devils. I'll have you up for slander… I'll— "

Dr. Mason, coming swiftly into the room, put an end to this outburst. The school doctor stared in astonishment at the tense figures standing round his patient. He decided it was none of his business.

"How is he, Wintringham?" he asked in a brisk professional manner. He had secured a bed at the Cottage Hospital, the ambulance was on its way, he felt efficient. David's silence pulled him up. He dropped on one knee. David was crouched on the other side, gazing fixedly at the stricken actor.

"How is he?" Mason repeated in a low voice.

"Not too good."

"That's a pity." He felt for the pulse on the other side.

"Hell!" he muttered to himself. "The man mustn't die here."

David was not listening. He was staring at the patient's head. George Lemming, seeing the rest of the cast coming in for the remaining properties, held up his hand. They crept forward and stood in a ring a few yards away.

"My God!" cried David suddenly. He leaned forward, and lifting Fenton's head, slipped off the wig and the stage bandage that was still wrapped about it. He jumped to his feet, pulling the two apart.

"Mason, why did we leave all this on? The man is not suffering from apoplexy at all. He is suffering from a damned great bash on his skull. Look!"

He held up the bandage, which he had separated from the wig, complete with the safety-pin which was still in place. On the outside the bandage was liberally splashed with stage gore, but inside, and beginning to come through in a dark stain alongside that erroneously scarlet patch, it was soaked with Robert Fenton's blood, welling out of a wound in the left side of his head. His own hair, under the wig, was sticky and plastered down with clots, and as the horrified cast followed the direction of David's hand they saw a thin trickle of fresh blood, loosed by the removal of the wig, begin to run down towards the ear of the unconscious man.

CHAPTER IV

Thank you, Miss Fawcett."

David fastened a safety-pin into the roller bandage he had put over a clean dressing on Robert Fenton's head and stood up to stretch his cramped legs. Ruth Fawcett, a tray of bowls and appliances in her hands, looked up at him.

"Matron said did you want her to come too, or will I do? She's looking after Billington-Smith. He was upset after he went to bed. It's his first term. He got over-excited, and I expect he drank too much lemonade for supper."

"You'll do very nicely, thank you," answered David. "We can't do any more here, I'm afraid," he added gravely.

"You think there isn't much chance— "

"It's only a question of time. Of course if we get him as far as Stanhurst they'll try a decompression. Dr. Mason has got a surgeon up to the hospital, and the theatre will be ready when he gets there. But personally I'd give him half-an-hour at the outside."

"Poor man!" Ruth Fawcett looked down at the dying actor and from him to Sonia Fenton, crouched on a chair a little way off. What would happen to her, to the whole company—to the school? Oh, why hadn't one of the masters gone on with *Julius Caesar*? Why had Mr. Redesdale opened his sheltered doors to these people from a world of calamity and violence? As she imagined what might be in store for them all, she was appalled.

"I should put down that tray," said David to her kindly, "we won't want it again. And you may as well sit down. This isn't much in your line, is it?"

She smiled gratefully and took a chair to Sonia Fenton's side. The latter, drawing vague comfort from a nurse's uniform, put her hand into Ruth's and found it held with sympathetic firmness.

The sick man's breathing had changed. It rose, louder and faster, to a peak of hideous laboured effort, then sank and sank until in the silence he seemed to have died indeed, so faintly and infrequently did his chest move. But when the frightened women looked at David for confirmation of this awful conclusion they found him still waiting, patiently and gravely, and presently they heard the horrible rasping sounds once more rising in their ears.

George Lemming came in from outside, and went up to Sonia. "We're going to stay in Stanhurst to-night," he explained. "We're packed up; when we've seen Bob and you into the ambulance we'll go. I've given a message

for Dewhurst at the hotel I think he'll be at, but I'll ring through again from Stanhurst. I very much doubt if we'll be able to do that matinee to-morrow. I don't see how Dewhurst can produce a leading man and a leading lady to meet us at Winchester by one o'clock. Obviously neither you nor Bob can act to-morrow. Besides, we don't know how he got that crack on the head. There may be trouble."

Sonia Fenton threw up her head with a tragic gesture. "Bob will never act again," she said sombrely.

As if in answer to her words the silence that followed grew deeper and deeper. No harsh breathing rose to destroy it. Then in the distance they heard the sound of an engine and wheels scrunching over the gravel. George was beginning, "There's the ambulance. I'll— " when they saw David Wintringham kneel beside the still figure on the floor and put Dr. Mason's stethoscope to the motionless chest. Very quietly he got to his feet.

"Doctor, he hasn't— ?" It was George Lemming who spoke. David nodded.

"Oh, my God!" The stage-manager turned away, his face working. He had been fond of the old boy.

Sonia screamed suddenly. Her cry brought the rest of the cast with a rush through the door, where they stood blocking the way until the men off the ambulance pushed past them with their rugs and stretcher, followed by Dr. Mason, who had met them in the drive to direct them to the museum.

"Too late," said David briefly. He raised his head and went on in a clear voice. "This man has died as the result of a blow on the side of the head. It will be obvious to all of you that the question of how he received that blow will have to be investigated, and that none of us here is competent to make the investigation. I am sorry to add to your present distress and difficulties, but I know that I am speaking for Dr. Mason as well as myself when I say that we, as doctors in charge of the case, find it our duty to inform the police at once, and to ask you for your own sakes to remain in this room until they come."

There was an instinctive movement towards the door, but the ambulance men who had retreated to it when they saw that their services would not be needed, now stood firm blocking the way, their steady eyes on David's face. Lionel Bassett made an ungainly plunge towards them.

"Get out of the way!" he said hoarsely.

The older of the two ambulance men looked at him.

"Use your common sense, mate," he advised with scorn.

A disturbance behind him made him turn. Edward Gash, still in costume, yellow-stockinged, cross-gartered, forced his way into the museum. He walked swiftly to the dead man's side and looked down at him, while the others stood paralysed by his sudden reappearance and strange manner. When he raised his head his face was chalk-white and his eyes blazing.

"So what?" he croaked, in a ghastly attempt at his usual manner.

David repeated his statement of the position, and before the steady contempt in his voice Gash's hysteria left him. He dropped his eyes and moved away to his clothes where he began to unfasten his costume with shaking hands.

"Well done, my boy," muttered Dr. Mason out of the corner of his mouth, "I couldn't have pulled that off so neatly myself. I'm getting old. But I'll see they stay here while you go and call the Station. Get the Stanhurst Superintendent. It's no good dragging our village constable from his bed."

As David strode away Dr. Mason sighed, and stooping, took hold of the edge of the car rug and pulled it up to cover Robert Fenton's shattered head.

Superintendent Rogers in person, accompanied by a detective-sergeant and a constable, arrived at Denbury School from Stanhurst at about a quarter to twelve. The ambulance had been sent away, as the police had intimated that they would undertake the subsequent removal of the body of the deceased. Mr. Redesdale, who with David and Dr. Mason had watched over the company in the museum, briefly explained the situation. He then suggested an adjournment to the school where the cast could be questioned in an atmosphere relieved of the presence of the dead.

After a short interval, therefore, they found themselves in Mrs. Redesdale's drawing-room, drinking hot tea and eating sandwiches. They were guarded by the constable and waited upon by Judith Redesdale, Jill Wintringham and Mr. Warwick, who obstinately refused to abandon his post as liaison master to the visitors, though all the other assistant masters had been sent to bed. The Superintendent was installed in Mr. Redesdale's study across the passage, while the detective-sergeant remained on guard in the museum, and made notes of everything he saw there that belonged to the company.

Dr. Mason, accompanied by his colleague, saw the Superintendent first and gave his evidence with the reasons for the delay in discovering the head wound. Neither he nor David Wintringham had realized the significance of the flattened condition of the safety-pin until they examined the whole bandage on making their discovery of the wound. David had noticed it but had not attached much importance to it, since this bandage was a stage property and not in its first youth. He had imagined that someone must at some time have trodden upon it. The bandage was a broad one consisting of three folds of cotton material. Until the actor's blood had soaked through it, making a dark border to the patch of stage blood, the wound and its effects had been hidden. Dr. Mason gave it as his opinion that the diseased state of the patient's arteries had contributed to his death. The skull wound did not appear to be very extensive, but the internal haemorrhage must have been severe to bring about death in the comparatively short time of an hour and a quarter to two hours.

The play had ended just after ten o'clock and the sick man had been discovered in the museum at a quarter past ten. His last appearance on the stage had taken place at ten minutes to ten and he left it at five to, so that he must have received the blow at some time between 9.55 and 10.15. Finally the doctor suggested that it might be possible for the man to have fallen in the museum, striking his head against one of the cases.

Superintendent Rogers received this idea politely, and allowed the doctor to go home. Whatever had hit Robert Fenton's head had not only flattened out the safety-pin but had left a tiny sliver of yellow varnished wood caught in the head of it. The museum cases round the place where Fenton had fallen showed no fresh scratches and were moreover painted green. He could not therefore accept the doctor's theory, but he saw no point in disproving it to the man himself. Dr. Mason retired, accompanied by David, who was kindly but firmly included in the dismissal.

Once outside the Headmaster's study David said goodnight to the school doctor and went back into the drawing-room, where he sat down near Edward Gash. He explained to the constable that Superintendent Rogers might want to see him again.

By this time Jill and her sister with Mr. Redesdale and Mr. Warwick had disappeared. David suffered a pang of conscience as he thought of his wife waiting to be taken home, but he stifled it with the thought that Judith would arrange something for her. The interest of the case held him with increasing force and he soon forgot everything else as he moved from member to member of the cast, encouraging them with ready sympathy to confide in him. He was genuinely sorry for their plight. Their life was precarious enough in the ordinary way without such a calamity being forced upon them. He was determined to find the one among them who was responsible.

In this way David very quietly opened his inquiry under the nose of the unsuspecting constable, who sat close to the drawing-room door with his eye fixed upon it, to anticipate if possible his superior's wishes. Meanwhile Superintendent Rogers ploughed doggedly forward with his routine examination of the individual members of the cast.

George Lemming was concise and frank in his statement. He realized that the younger members of the cast would seize this opportunity of airing all their past grievances and present gossip, both with regard to Fenton's temper, his rows with Gash, his jealousy of Nigel Trent's apparent friendship with his wife, and the thefts in the company. Rogers was particularly interested in these and wanted to know if the other companies of the group were similarly afflicted.

"I don't know," answered George. "Wait a bit, though. I did hear of some trouble in the second company—that would be about a year ago. Strewth!" he exclaimed after a moment's thought.

"Remembered something?" prompted the Superintendent.

"Yes. I was trying to think when it was I'd heard of it, and I recollect now it was just after Bassett joined our company again. He was lent to Number Two company in exchange for one of theirs and came back after three months."

"Did you have any thefts while he was away?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, never mind. I can go into that later."

George looked profoundly unhappy. He had been unwilling to pin the stealing on to Lionel, mainly because he considered the universal opinion of him to be unjust. But in the light of what the cop had got out of him it looked damned suggestive and ugly.

"I wouldn't worry," said Rogers. "You've got a perfect alibi for yourself, on the stage, front or back, from the end of the first interval till you were told of the accident. There are some of the rest who'll be envying you before long."

George Lemming's face was grim as he re-entered the drawing-room, making way for Lionel Bassett.

Superintendent Rogers found his next witness thoroughly unsatisfactory. In the first place the man was obviously, almost indecently, terrified out of his life. Whether this was in regard to the thefts or to Fenton's death, whether it arose from a guilty conscience or a craven nature, the Superintendent was not prepared to say. But the man annoyed him and he found himself using a bullying tone that he himself would have described as being foreign to his nature.

But apart from his demeanour, which was highly suspicious, and his physique, which would have been adequate to deal the fatal blow, Bassett had very little to offer. He had been in the museum shortly before the end of the second interval, and had not gone back there again. After his first appearance in the last part of the play he had put on his stage bandage in the wings, remaining there until his next call. At the conclusion of his second short scene with Sir Toby both he and Fenton had left the stage, but while the latter went into the museum again, he had stood at the bottom of the steps inside the hall door, waiting for the end of the play.

Rogers decided not to raise the question of the thefts at this stage. The whole matter was too vague and so far he had only heard the view of one member of the company. He dismissed Lionel Bassett with a curt nod and went on to Nigel Trent.

"Blimey!" thought Rogers as the young man came into the room. "What a crew! First a tough with the jitters, and now a pansy."

But as Nigel began to answer questions in his quiet cultivated voice, keeping his blue eyes fixed on the Superintendent's own, the latter changed his mind, deciding that possibly the young man's face was his misfortune and

not his fault. Trent made no attempt to conceal his quarrel with Fenton which had taken place in the second interval. But he explained that everyone got into Fenton's bad books at one time or another. The man's temper was proverbial and he personally had attached very little importance to the affair.

"To the quarrel, do you mean?" asked Rogers, "or to this friendship of yours with Mrs. Fenton?"

"Both," said Nigel shortly.

"Well, we shall see."

The Superintendent passed on to the routine questions. He found that Nigel had gone back to the stage after his quarrel with Fenton, which had taken place behind the boot-room. Trent had remained on the stage until the end of the play, when he had gone out on to the steps during the singing of Feste's song. He confirmed the fact of Bassett's presence just inside the door at this time. He said that the noise of the singing and its accompaniment would have prevented any of them from hearing sounds from the museum unless these had been very loud.

Sonia Fenton was interviewed next. She was looking, distraught and ill and kept twisting her handkerchief round her finger and unwinding it again with endless jerky movements. Her actions during the important last scenes of the play had been very simple. She had gone to her dressing-room in the second interval and then back to the stage before the end of it, and had stayed there until the end of the play. She had just gone to her dressing-room again when news of her husband's illness was brought to her by one of the junior members of the cast.

"Your husband was considerably older than yourself, Mrs. Fenton?"

The large brown eyes opened very wide, and a faint smile appeared on the wan face.

"Oh yes. Bob was forty-nine."

"And you are—what shall we say?" Rogers took into account the tear-stained complexion—the woman would look quite young in some lights, properly made up—and went on:

"Well, not more than thirty-seven."

"Thirty-four," snapped Sonia angrily.

"Thirty-four. Had you been married long?"

"Six years." A wary tone crept into her voice, but the Superintendent did not notice it. He was leading up to another matter.

"How long has Mr. Trent been in the company?"

"About a year."

"I suppose these young men change pretty frequently. They'd look on this company as a training-ground, so to speak."

"Not necessarily. George Lemming has been with us for years—five years,

at least."

"I see. But as a rule you wouldn't get to know them very well personally, I suppose?"

"That again would depend."

"On what?"

Sonia opened her mouth and shut it, then burst out, "I don't know what you're insinuating, but if you think there's anything between Nigel and me you're very much— "

"Please!" Superintendent Rogers stopped her. "I haven't said I did. And certainly the young man gave me to understand he hardly knew you at all."

Sonia glared at him furiously. To trap her into a display of her own feelings for Nigel and then tell her he had disowned their friendship. The cad! And Nigel too, a cad of cads. Rogers went on speaking.

"But though I am prepared to take your word for it, your husband evidently was not. Are you aware that Trent had a violent quarrel with Fenton in the second interval? It happened outside the boot-room, he said. If you were changing your costume, it's a wonder you didn't hear them at it?"

Sonia Fenton gave a little moan, and slipped sideways off her chair.

In the bustle and upset caused by this diversion the proceedings were suspended. The constable, hastily summoned, assisted his superior in carrying the leading lady back to the drawing-room, David Wintringham shot away to recall Judith Redesdale and find suitable stimulants, and the company seethed about and got in everyone's way, their torn nerves by this time quite beyond their control.

At last order was restored. Sonia Fenton, revived and shaky, was released from further questioning and ordered to bed by David. The Cranstons had nobly volunteered to put up the widow at their cottage. She was led away by Judith, a handkerchief pressed over her mouth.

When the agitation had died down Superintendent Rogers resumed nis examination of Shakespeare Players Ltd. The next witness of importance was Edward Gash. Rogers, after the unanimous evidence with regard to Bob Fenton's temper, was not inclined to attach much importance to his quarrels with Gash. Professional jealousy as a motive for homicide seemed to him to belong more to the realms of melodrama than of real life. If Gash wanted to rise, and was confident in his own powers, the last thing he was likely to do was to kill the leading man of his company. Publicity was all very well, but this would be hardly of a kind to impress producers and managers. On the other hand Gash's behaviour throughout the evening had been highly irregular. He had made a scene in the dressing-room before the play started, and had even, according to George Lemming's previous statement, knocked down several of the museum exhibits in his fit of temper. Who was to say that these weapons, as they were described, did not give the guilty party his idea,

and even as well the means to carry it out?

On second thoughts Rogers dismissed this as far-fetched. If the blow had been dealt by the hand of man, and that the Superintendent was ready to back, then surely it had not been premeditated but had been struck in a sudden fit of fury. The place, the time, the surroundings, were so eminently unsuitable for cold-blooded murder. It was by sheer chance that Fenton had gone back alone to the museum after making his last appearance in the play. But he could not have been the only one to go there. Someone had seen him and had followed him, or else had gone there on business of his own. Perhaps there had been a sudden determination to wipe out old scores or perhaps the quarrel had been forced by Fenton's aggressive behaviour. How had this happened? And why? And which of them was involved?

Gash said he was in the museum shortly before the end of the second interval, and that Fenton was not there. Possibly that was when Fenton was quarrelling with Trent behind the boot-room. But was Gash speaking the truth? His later behaviour had been so extraordinary. At a time when he could have made himself useful he had dashed out into the night and not been seen again until just after the actor's death. Superintendent Rogers could not help wondering if this expedition had been made in order to dispose of the weapon used with such disastrous results. Bassett would have to be questioned again. He had left the stage before Gash. As he stood by the stage door he should have seen the latter come out at the end of Malvolio's last appearance.

Neither the other four men of the company nor the two remaining girls had anything to add to what the Superintendent had already learned. The various quarrels were confirmed and the thefts were described in detail by the chief sufferers from them. Hilary Stocton, who thought herself much in love with Nigel Trent, tried to describe Sonia Fenton's wanton and vicious hold upon the young man's affections. But the Superintendent, remembering Nigel's frank indifference, was not influenced by her suggestions.

As he had now concluded his first interviews with Shakespeare Players Ltd., and as it was already Saturday morning, the Superintendent decided to postpone his further inquiries until later in the day, when the return of Mr. Dewhurst from Eastbourne might throw more light on the characters involved in the case.

Judith Redesdale sank into an armchair and allowed herself to be persuaded to have a whisky-and-soda, a drink she heartily disliked.

"Can't have you collapsing in the middle of the weekend," said her husband sternly.

She smiled up at him with a wan face.

"I suppose we *must* carry on, but it will be a perfect nightmare entertaining the parents, most of whom won't know what's happened, and looking after

these poor stranded players, and watching the police hunt down one of them, if it was one of them who did it, and not a pure accident. David, are you absolutely sure he didn't just fall and bang his head on a case in the museum?"

"Practically certain. The shaving of wood in the head of the flattened safety-pin is totally unlike the museum cases. Besides, I doubt if a fall from a standing position would do so much damage, though he was a fairly heavy man. Of course I don't know for certain if there is a fracture of the skull under the scalp wound. It is conceivable that he fell at the onset of a stroke. We can't know that until after the P.M. to-morrow. That will show the site of the haemorrhage that caused his death and also the extent of the wound and its connection with the haemorrhage, if any."

"If they decide that it was an attack by some person or other I suppose they will be in and about here until they find out who did it. It's ghastly!"

Judith's face crumpled up as if she were going to cry. She got to her feet and stood against the mantelpiece, turning her back on the two men. David sipped thoughtfully.

"Did you manage to billet them all successfully, Charles?" he asked.

"We managed," answered Mr. Redesdale, "the Cranstons very kindly took Mrs. Fenton in, as you know. We put the two other girls in the temporary isolation room next to Miss Fawcett. Four of the men are in the Sanatorium—we've only got two tonsillitis cases and a sprained ankle in there at the moment. The other four men are in the Masters' House. Judith dug out a couple of Lilos and there's a sofa and several armchairs. They didn't seem to mind. Said the Lilos were heaven compared with some of the beds they are accustomed to find in lodgings."

"Poor devils! They have a pretty tough time, I imagine. Which of them did you put in the Masters' House?"

"Oh, Superintendent Rogers arranged that; they've got the stage manager who seems to be in charge now, that big awkward chap who did Aguecheek, the Malvolio, and the Orsino. Extraordinary-looking boy, that—like a Rossetti angel—almost indecent in real life."

"And the body?" David glanced at Judith's back and lowered his voice. "Is it still with us?"

"Yes. Rogers left the constable on guard and said he would send in an ambulance about nine. He had let the other ambulance go back, you know." The Headmaster spoke bitterly. "He seemed quite surprised when I told him that a mortuary was not considered part of the essential equipment of a modern prep school."

David grinned.

"The force really should try to keep up with improvements," he commiserated.

Mr. Redesdale looked at his watch and moved to his wife's side.

"Darling, don't you think—bed?" he suggested, putting an arm round her shoulders. She leaned her head against him with a weary gesture.

"I suppose so… Charles!" She lifted her head again, staring at the mantelpiece with a frown.

"Yes?"

"What have you done with the medals?"

"The medals?" He gazed vacantly before him. "Oh, the *medals*!"

"Yes, darling, the gold medals won by your grandfather. You're more asleep than I am. Where are they?"

Charles Redesdale looked both bewildered and guilty. He had given trouble earlier in the evening about his tie; this was worse. He never could remember where things were.

"I have a feeling I showed them to someone at one stage— " he began, and stopped uncertainly.

"When was that?" The question came from David Wintringham, snapping into the vague silence like the crack of a whip and making Mr. Redesdale jump nervously.

"I really don't remember. And I have a feeling that I put them back. Why should the time be important?"

"Because there have been thefts in this theatrical company. It is quite possible that Fenton discovered the thief, quarrelled with him, and got a crack on the head in consequence. It is also quite possible that the same thief took your medals while the company was in here."

"Oh, but how could he?" Judith interrupted. "They were watched over by that constable. They were just sitting round like frightened rabbits while I was here."

"There was one moment," David answered, "when they were all scuttling about like still more frightened rabbits. And that was when Mrs. Fenton was carried in here in a fainting condition."

The Redesdales looked shocked.

"Could anyone really do such a thing at such a time?"

"The sort of person we know we are dealing with could do anything in the pinching line at *any* time. It's second nature to him—or a disease—depends how you look at crime."

"We shall have to tell the Superintendent about this, I suppose?" Judith asked.

"You will, unless Charles can remember who he showed the medals to and which drawer he put them in afterwards."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"I expect it will come back to me," began the Headmaster hopefully, but a look from his wife checked him, and he sighed.

"If we personally are going to be involved in this case," said Judith firmly, "it'll have to be in better hands than those of the Stanhurst police. With all due respect to Mr. Rogers I think it will take him a long long time to solve our problem. Don't you think so, David?"

He nodded.

"Does that mean you want me to take it up?"

Judith patted his cheek.

"No, my dear brother-in-law. Don't be so vain. Much as I admire your intellect, I think it would be more suitable not to have the detecting done by one of the family. Don't you, Charles?"

"Quite."

"So, David, it can't be you. But haven't you got an Inspector friend at Scotland Yard? Charles knows the Chief Constable, and my people have known him for years, of course. I'm sure he could wangle it tactfully—now that we're involved in it with these medals."

"But I may remember where— "

David cut Mr. Redesdale short.

"That's brilliant, Judy. Get on to your Chief Constable, Charles, and get him to ask for Inspector Mitchell. Perhaps he'd better not mention my being here. Just say Dr. Wintringham's sister-in-law was particularly anxious to have Mitchell if it could be wangled."

"It would be much the best thing," urged Judith. "If this investigation drags on and it gets into the Press and the parents have to be told all about it, we shall be done for. It wasn't so bad when we thought it was solely an affair of the actors, but now these medals going—we don't know where it will end. What would you say, as a parent, if you thought there was an uncaught murderer-thief staying at your boy's prep school, and beginning to turn his attentions to school property? We must have the thing cleared up at once, and Scotland Yard can do it quicker than anyone else."

"Yes, I think you're right," said Charles Redesdale gravely.

When David reached his car he found Jill in the driving seat, her arms resting on the wheel, her head laid down on her arms, fast asleep. She jerked up as he opened the door.

"My poor sweet! How long have you been here? I thought Charles had run you home."

"He was so dreadfully worried. I didn't like to ask him."

"Why didn't you come in again, then? Judith would have looked after

you."

"She was worried to death too, poor dear."

"You ought to have taken the car and gone home."

"Leaving you to walk four miles at this time of night, or is it morning? With all the work I know you're arranging for yourself to-morrow—to-day? Not much, I wouldn't."

"You overwhelm me, darling. Shove up, and let me get in."

"Do you think you ought to drive? You smell very alcoholic."

"I'll be better than you would be. You can't steer if you have to prop your eyes open with both hands."

"Perhaps you're right." She yawned and slid away into the passenger seat. "Have you discovered the murderer yet?"

"No. And it just possibly may not be a murder at all."

"Oh no! Oh, not at all! Don't you believe it! When you're there, it's always a murder."

"Charles is going to try to get Mitchell down."

"Was that your idea?"

"No, Judith's."

"Very sensible of her. Very like Judith… Great respect for law and order… specialists… Scotland Yard."

"Sweetheart, you can't go to sleep on my shoulder if I'm driving."

"You oughtn't to drive—very alcoholic."

"Don't be nervous. You shall be spared this time."

He started up the car and felt for his wife's knee to give it a reassuring pat. But Jill was already asleep again, curled sideways on the passenger seat, with her soft brown curls drooping on to her shoulder.

SATURDAY

CHAPTER V

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Denbury School slept late that Saturday morning. It was customary after an evening entertainment to give the boys a “long lie,” and though with youthful resilience they never slept beyond their normal hour, but occupied the time with reading or gossip, their elders made the most of it and were fortified by the extra rest. Breakfast on these mornings of recuperation and whole holiday took place at nine o’clock.

Mr. Redesdale, waking after a short and disturbed night, noted the general quiet. He prayed that the promised ambulance might be punctual and remove the body of the dead actor while the school was taking breakfast, safely isolated in the dining-room. It was with many forebodings and gloomy anticipations of fresh trials that at length he left his bed and made his way to the bathroom.

In the Masters’ House also the general gloom was deep, and the general irritation deeper. Mr. Warwick woke at seven, oppressed by an uneasy sense of work incompleted. He remembered the touring company, their continued presence at the school, and his responsibilities regarding them. He cursed his own devotion to duty, turned over and settled down again. But no sooner was he comfortably asleep once more than the housemaid, appealing to him as the senior master present, and the one who had had most to do with the strangers, woke him up again to inquire whether she was to rouse out the four gentlemen in the sitting-room or to leave them be.

“Anything you like. Tell them to go to hell,” murmured Mr. Warwick with his eyes shut. He was not going to be done out of his “long lie,” and he was not going to do anyone’s thinking for them until he was up and dressed.

The housemaid pursed her lips and hesitated. It was all very well, and not a very nice way for a gentleman to speak to a girl, and as for sending them to hell, it wasn’t her business. If they didn’t want the sitting-room done they could do without.

“I’d better leave it for the present then, had I, sir?”

A grunt which might have been yes or no was all the answer Mr. Warwick, with his eyes still shut, would give. The housemaid closed the door in a brisk noisy fashion and went away to attack the Masters’ dining-room, leaving the unconscious Shakespeare Players Ltd. undisturbed.

They were sleeping a sleep of exhaustion, and if there were a guilty conscience among the four it was not apparent in their faces. Edward Gash’s

body had parted from his Lilo during the night and lay at right angles to it with his head still on the pillow, but this could be due not so much to an uneasy soul as to unfamiliarity with his couch. Nigel Trent occupied the other Lilo, lying quietly, like a peaceful child, with one hand under his cheek. The bony frame of Lionel Bassett was twisted into the angles of the sofa, while near the window George Lemming was disposed neatly on two armchairs, which contained his short length in apparent comfort.

At eight the housemaid started on her official round. As his curtains rattled back Mr, Warwick started up, fully awake.

"Are the visitors getting up, Winnie?" he asked.

"I'm sure I don't know, sir." Her voice was cold. "You told me I was not to disturb them."

Mr. Warwick, with a vague recollection of what he had said, smiled apologetically.

"They were very late last night—we all were," he explained. "Better let them sleep it off if they want to. They had a terrible time last night, Winnie. I expect you heard about it."

It was bound to be all round the school. Mr. Warwick was anxious to put the news on an open basis and to divest it of all false rumours and exaggerations.

"Yes, sir." Winnie began to thaw into her usual loquacious self. "Sergeant was saying this morning that one of the actors had been hit on the head and killed. It's a terrible thing for the school, isn't it, sir? I mean what with the papers and that. Sergeant says he wishes he'd been round in the back drive at the end of the play, instead of that Billy Oldfield. He might of heard something. But of course he was holding the door in the Hall."

"What was Billy doing up at the school?"

"Oh, mooching about as usual. Trying to get tips, opening car doors, I expect. He's been told not to, but he will persist in it. I think he ought to be in a home, if you ask me. He's getting such a big lad these days; he'll do someone a mischief, I shouldn't wonder."

Mr. Warwick was thoughtful after Winnie had gone. Billy Oldfield was a mental defective who lived at Denbury village, about a mile from the school. He occasionally helped the gardeners or groundsman and had a habit of appearing on occasions such as the half-term holiday, partly to see if his services would be required, and partly out of childish curiosity. He was looked upon by the staff with tolerance and pity, but of late he had sometimes been rude and noisy, and Mr. Redesdale had suggested that he might be discouraged by degrees from coming. He was nearly seventeen and big and strong for his age. Mr. Warwick decided to inform the police of what he had heard. Billy was not too dull to hear the sounds of a quarrel.

When he reached the dining-room he found the other masters at breakfast

with the exception of Mr. Schofield, who was often late. He sat down, thankful that the others were fully occupied with their correspondence, their newspapers and their meal, and did not seem disposed to question him about the events of the night before.

His peace, however, was short-lived. He had just collected coffee and bacon from the sideboard, and was returning to his chair when the door burst open and Mr. Schofield appeared, his face red with annoyance.

"What on earth is happening?" he cried angrily.

"Happening?" The masters looked up with raised eyebrows.

"Have none of you been in the sitting-room? I have just gone there for a book and I found the place occupied by no less than four sleeping men. Who are they? What are they doing there? Is the school mad, or am I?"

"Neither. I take it you missed the show last night."

"I did. I don't waste my time unnecessarily."

Mr. Warwick put down his breakfast and facing his indignant colleague, explained the situation in a few curt sentences. Mr. Schofield stood quite still during this recital, his hands clenched at his sides, while the red colour faded from his face, leaving it a curious yellow. There was complete silence when Warwick had finished. The others watched with puzzled expressions in their eyes. Mr. Schofield did not look at them; his gaze was directed far off, through the window and beyond the playing-fields to the horizon. He gave a strange little sigh of satisfaction. "I see," he said quietly, and as he began to pour out coffee Mr. Warwick noticed a faint smile at the corners of his lips.

The front drive was ringed about with boys. On half-term Saturday morning parents were allowed to take their sons away at half-past ten and the sons were determined not to miss a minute of their precious leave-out. So, well ahead of time, they congregated at the sides of the front drive and waited in chattering groups for the arrival of the family cars.

The largest number on this Saturday morning was clustered about the person of Alastair Wintringham. His news of the night before had fired the imagination of the school, and they hoped that he would have fresh detail of his Uncle David's activities. In this, however, they were disappointed, because the eminent detective had not yet put in an appearance.

"Are you sure he isn't here, Wintringham?"

"Practically sure. I couldn't find him anywhere. I asked the bobby in charge of the museum."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing, really."

What the constable had in fact said was "You can lay off, young nosey! I'm telling you nix. Morbid, I calls it, at your age," but Alastair did not

propose to repeat this to his friends.

"Some of the actors are in the San."

"I know that." Alastair was scornful. "I was under Herne's window this morning after breakfast. He does deaf and dumb language so that you can understand it quite well. He said one of the actors had told him Sir Toby was hit with a blunt instrument."

"Would that be one of them that really knows?"

"I expect they all know. They were all kept here last night, weren't they?"

"Two of the actresses were in Isolation. I saw Miss Fawcett at the door talking to one. She had on blue pyjamas."

"Who? Miss Fawcett?"

The crowd doubled up with shrieks of appreciative laughter, over which Alastair could be heard bawling, "Don't be an idiot! Not Miss Fawcett—the actress."

When the mirth had died down Bruce Pritchard said thoughtfully, "I wonder if they found the blunt instrument in the museum."

"I don't expect so. No-one would be fool enough to leave it lying there. It would show his finger-prints. I expect he hid it."

"Where?"

"How do I know? But it would be near, I suppose. I don't think any of them went away before the police came. Hermione's room looks out over the museum, and she stayed awake and saw the police arriving. They were in the museum for ages and then they all came out with the actors as well and went into the school. She heard one of them say, 'Everyone here? Right.' So they must have all been there."

"I expect it's hidden in the grounds," said Bruce Pritchard.

"Then we're sure to see the cops looking for it," exclaimed Coker Major joyously.

"No, you won't." Howard was contemptuous. "You're going out with your people. But I shall, because mine aren't coming."

"I think," said Bruce Pritchard seriously, "that I shall look for it myself. My father isn't coming till this afternoon, so I shall have all the morning."

"Good idea!"

"So shall I!"

"Brainy idea, Pritchard."

"So shall I!"

"I shall too."

"We'd better not get in each other's way," said Pritchard. "I bag the back drive from the museum down to the back entrance, because it was my idea."

"Bags I the wood!"

"Bags I near the pavilion!"

"The tennis court!"

"The boat pond!"

"There's my father," said Alastair, as Hugh Wintringham's car swept through the gates, and up the drive. "Don't let the masters or the police know what you're doing. And if you find anything keep it in your lockers till I come back. I'll find out if possible where Uncle David is. We're sure to be back early because we are playing in the match."

He settled his school felt hat on his head, buttoned up his blazer and ran forward to his parents' car. Soon they were driving along country lanes.

"I brought a picnic lunch," his mother explained. "I thought we might go to Stanhurst Common. Would you like that?"

"Yes. Daddy, is Uncle David coming this afternoon?"

"He wants to, if he has time."

"Why, what is he doing?"

"Well, actually he's in Stanhurst this morning."

"Oh! Is there an inquest?"

"An inquest?" Both Mr. and Mrs. Wintringham were astonished. Then Hugh Wintringham laughed.

"You seem to think your Uncle David does nothing but attend inquests. As a matter of fact he's at the Cottage Hospital."

"Oh." Alastair looked out of the car window.

"Have a sweet?" asked his mother, offering a newly-opened box.

"Thanks." Alastair selected a large green one and began to suck it thoughtfully. What could Uncle David possibly want at the Cottage Hospital? Then he remembered. At an inquest it always said a lot about the post-mortem. Uncle David must be doing a post-mortem on the murdered actor.

"What's the pitch like this year, Alastair?" asked his father.

"All right, I think."

Mr. and Mrs. Redesdale stood on the steps to welcome those newer parents who made a more formal entry than the Wintringhams and other old hands.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Billington-Smith, your boy was a little over-excited by the play last night. Matron has kept him in bed till you came, but she thinks he might get up now—if he could have a really quiet day. Miss Fawcett, can you take Mrs. Billington-Smith up? I expect she would like to see Matron first."

Judith moved on, speaking a word here and a word there, admirably fulfilling her duties as hostess in spite of a splitting headache and a lively dread that at any moment a crowd of unshaven, eccentrically clothed actors would emerge from the school, or a fleet of police cars with uniformed

occupants would rush into the drive.

"Good-morning, Colonel Crawford. I think it will be fine for the match, don't you? It's very sporting of you to play. Mr. Coker is quite enthusiastic about his team this year. Have you found your boy?"

"They all look exactly the same to me," said Mrs. Flinders-Crawford helplessly. "With those floppy hats on so that you can't see the colour of their hair. Oh, there he is. Mark!"

The young Flinders-Crawford, who had temporarily forgotten the purpose for which he had been herded into the drive and was attempting to trip up his nearest neighbour, looked round in surprise at the sound of his mother's voice. "Come on, Mark, we're waiting! I sometimes think he's quite dotty," she exclaimed as her son came up.

Judith smiled stiffly and passed on. Mark followed his mother's impatient footsteps to the car. He had no words to tell her that school was school and home was home, that there were thousands of miles between them, and that this sudden fusing of the two places was unexpected and bewildering. And he would not have thought it worth while explaining if he had been able to do so.

Mr. Warwick sought out the Headmaster.

"They are all having breakfast," he said in a low voice. "All except Mrs. Fenton, that is to say. I let our lot sleep on, but the other four came over from the San, and woke them up. Then the two girls came across, so I thought they'd better be fed."

"Quite right. If you possibly can, keep them quiet till the parents have collected their boys, will you, Warwick? It won't matter so much this afternoon if they are still here. They will be less conspicuous in a large crowd."

"Right."

"I'm most grateful to you for the way you're tackling these people."

"Not at all. They amuse me."

"Can't say they do me. I keep wondering which of them is the murderer."

Mr. Warwick frowned.

"Quite frankly, I can't place any of them in that rôle. But I suppose I must be wrong; someone did it."

The Headmaster sighed and passed on. He saw his wife standing for a moment alone and paused beside her.

"David has gone in to attend the post-mortem at Stanhurst Cottage Hospital. The inquest will be on Monday and may be adjourned if they don't find out by then who did it. David thinks with any luck we can keep out of the Press till Monday. He will be here for lunch. And we are to have the inspector he suggested; Mitchell, I think the name is."

"Oh, I'm glad. He and David have worked together before. At least David

has helped him; he isn't allowed to be on the cases officially; I suppose he can't be."

"Well, the man is arriving directly after lunch, I gather. But he will take matters into his own hands as soon as he gets here. Superintendent Rogers is in Stanhurst this morning, probably going into the bona fides of the company. He has sent two plain-clothes men over here. I don't know what they are doing, but it isn't our business to ask them. I did ring up the Superintendent when I knew Inspector Mitchell was coming. He was non-committal about it, but I think on the whole he was relieved."

"I should think so indeed. Good-morning, Mrs. Taylor. Your boy was standing at the bottom of the steps just now. Yes, there he is. Taylor!"

"Taylor, you're wanted!"

"Wake up, Bonzo!"

"Buck up, Bonzo, your mother's come."

Mrs. Taylor gazed affectionately at her son as he approached.

"I can't think why they give him that dreadful nickname —Bonzo. Can you?"

Judith said nothing, but smiled politely and watched them go. You should just look in the mirror, my good woman, she thought, then you would know why your son is called Bonzo, for the pair of you are as like as two peas in a pod.

Nigel Trent was very bored. He was of an age to resent inaction of any kind, and his present enforced idleness was causing him a growing irritation and resentment. For an hour after his late breakfast he read the newspaper and made a half-hearted attempt at getting level with his fan-mail.

This consisted chiefly of school-girl effusions of a sadly unseemly nature, and he soon gave it up in disgust, and tipping the neglected balance of his correspondence into the waste-paper basket, he went off to explore the school.

About half the boys had gone out with their parents. A large proportion of the remainder were expecting their people in the afternoon, and these, together with the wholly neglected remainder, whose homes were too far off to make visits possible, were occupying themselves with various activities in the grounds. Nigel watched them sailing boats on a small pond, digging diminutive gardens, flying model aeroplanes in the football field or just wandering about in small groups. It was all very peaceful and orderly.

On the other side of the field he saw the roof of the Cranstons' house looking over the trees. Sonia Fenton was there. He wondered what she was making of her present unusual surroundings. Probably exercising her well-known charm to capacity. He decided that he would not go across to visit her and instead turned into the school by the side door into the Hall.

He found the School Sergeant tidying up the stage and restoring it to its normal condition. His offer of help was refused, nor did the Sergeant seem anxious to talk, so Nigel wandered on into the main corridor where he met Mr. Cranston and Mr. Hill leaving the Masters' Common Room together. They stopped to ask him if he wanted any assistance.

"No, I'm just wandering," answered Nigel. "Is that all right? There doesn't seem to be anything doing in the police line at the moment, and the nervous tension in our party is getting too high for me."

"Would you like to see over the school?" suggested Mr. Cranston kindly. "Hill, are you busy?"

"Not at the moment." Mr. Hill's tone was not enthusiastic.

"Oh, please don't bother. I can browse round on my own if I'm not being a nuisance."

"Right. Class-rooms below, dormitories above. If you really don't mind, I have got some books I ought to correct."

Mr. Hill tempered his withdrawal with a smile and swung off down the corridor. Nigel looked into the school dining-room, turned back at the Headmaster's green baize door, and made his way upstairs.

All was quiet in the dormitories; the white-covered beds were flat and neat, the alternate washstands and chests of drawers were tidily arranged, the sponges in place, the combs and brushes marshalled in rows. Bedroom slippers stood before each chair, dressing-gowns hung from hooks. No other clothes were to be seen.

Feeling a little awed by this display of tidiness and with his mind drifting back to the not so distant past, Nigel walked towards an open door from which came the sound of cheerful voices.

"Thurston's ankle is practically well," Matron was saying. "He can come back to-night. I'm letting him watch the match this afternoon. Herne and the other two had better stay in the San till Monday. If they join in the week-end festivities their temperatures are sure to go up again."

"How did you get on last night?" Ruth Fawcett asked. "Weren't you nervous with those four actors in the San? You heard it wasn't an accident, didn't you?"

"Of course I wasn't frightened. The robert was quite near outside the museum, and the Superintendent assured me in confidence that all the possible suspects were in the Masters' House."

"Including this one," said Nigel from the doorway. Though it was a confession of eaves-dropping, he could not resist a good entrance line.

The two women gave little shrieks of surprise and turned to look at him. With his hands out, holding on to each side of the doorway, his graceful figure bowing his self-introduction, and the sun lighting up the cheerful smile on his

handsome face, he presented such a beautiful picture that Ruth Fawcett's heart turned over and she found herself smiling in return.

"This is Matron's consulting-room," she said. "Come right in and tell us where the pain is."

Nigel accepted the invitation gladly. To find a really pretty girl, and a friendly one, in such a place, exceeded his best hopes.

"I'm suffering from unemployment," he explained. "So I went exploring. We ought to be on our way from Stanhurst to Winchester at this moment, but we look like spending the whole week-end billeted on you. Rotten bad luck!"

"On us, you mean?"

They both laughed. They were still laughing when Mr. Hill passed outside the door. He had not heard his beloved laugh with such abandon for some time; she had been unaccountably grave of late—run down, perhaps. He looked in to see the cause of her mirth. Matron was just inside the door. Beyond her near the window Ruth Fawcett, more beautiful than ever, was looking up with sparkling eyes into Nigel's face.

"It's the young actor," whispered Matron. "Don't they make a picture together?" she added. "Like a scene from a film come to life."

Mr. Hill found the impression made upon him far from enjoyable. He regretted his former selfish refusal to act as the young man's escort. He decided to make amends. "Oh, there you are," he said, "I wondered if you'd like a game of tennis. There's nothing doing at the moment."

Nigel saw Ruth Fawcett's eyes change as Mr. Hill appeared. He saw the blush that spread over her face and neck, and diagnosed her condition with accuracy. All the same, it would do her good to have a little variety. He looked back over his shoulder as he followed Mr. Hill to the door.

"You'll be watching the match, won't you? See you then, I hope."

"Why not?" thought Ruth, when she was alone. John Hill had not even said good-morning to her when he came into the room.

Sonia Fenton lay in bed, a prey to the deepest despair. What was going to become of her? She had a level head, and she knew that her acting, though sound, was not good enough to support her in a leading position without her husband's presence and influence. Bob had been really good, and he had inspired her sometimes to do better than her best. Without him she would sink to a lower level of achievement, and then, with the years catching up on her, and no talent for character parts, where would she be? Besides, these Shakespeare companies were off the beaten track. Her experience with them would be no help for ordinary tours, especially now when so few touring companies went out. Repertory was not much of a hope either. It absorbed the young talent from the schools of acting. Whichever way she looked the future

was dark. She had started too late. She was not really an actress at heart. It was Bob who had drawn her into it, Bob and a romantic love of the theatre and her former unsatisfactory existence. It was rather wonderful that she had got as far as she had.

Her thoughts came round full circle and her present precarious position appalled her anew. The company could not leave Denbury School until the mystery of Bob Fenton's death was cleared up and so long as they stayed at the school she was in danger. A dreadful thought came into her mind, but she rejected it firmly. It wasn't possible—nothing so utterly terrible could have happened.

Miss Cranston knocked gently and went in.

"Shall I take your tray? Oh, you've eaten nothing. That won't do, you know."

"I couldn't." Sonia lay back in tragic exhaustion. Her face was haggard enough for the part, there were dark circles under her eyes, her cheeks without make-up were pale. "You must let me help you if there is anything at all I can do," said Miss Cranston gently. "Perhaps you would rather just be left alone. But I want you to feel that you have friends at hand if you would find relief in talking things over."

Sonia stretched out an impulsive hand.

"How good you are to me! There *is* just one thing. I should like to see Nigel—Nigel Trent. He—he was a great friend of my husband's."

"Of course. I will ask him in to tea if you feel well enough to get up. Or perhaps you will come down this evening?"

Blast the woman, thought Sonia. She would have these utterly antiquated ideas. It obviously hadn't occurred to her that it was possible to bring Nigel to see her in bed. Or was she doing it on purpose? Miss Cranston's round middle-aged face gave no indication of her thoughts. Sonia lay back on her pillows.

"I don't feel very well at present," she said feebly, " I think I would like the doctor to see me. Not the young one," she went on, remembering David's manner with Edward Gash, "the elderly one, Dr. Mason, isn't it?"

"I'll phone him," answered Miss Cranston. "Now don't you think you had better settle down and try to get some more sleep? I'll pull your curtains, otherwise the sun will be on your face.

She left her guest and presently went over to the school. She was worried about Sonia; the poor woman seemed to be suffering very badly from the shock of her terrible experience. As she passed under Sonia's window she was very greatly surprised therefore, on looking up, to see the curtains swing into place as the invalid withdrew her head and disappeared behind them.

CHAPTER VI

The Fathers won the toss and elected to bat. They retired to the pavilion, and while Mr. Coker, Hugh Wintringham, and the first wicket man put on pads and gloves, the others disposed themselves on the steps or in deck-chairs, and hoped that the opening pair would play themselves in and settle down. There was a good deal of stir and bustle round the telegraph and scoring-table, where several boys were trying to sort out scoring-books and pencils. One of them went up to Mr. Coker.

"Sir, could you give us the batting order?"

"Half a mo." Mr. Coker fished in the pocket of his blazer which he had hung over the pavilion rail. "Here you are. Give it to Colonel Crawford when you've done with it."

"Yes, sir."

The boys at the scoring-table began to write feverishly, their tongues at the corners of their mouths and their foreheads nearly touching the page.

"Buck up, you two! The umpires are going out."

"Oh, goodness! Has anyone got a sharp pencil? This one's all worn down on the side."

"Can I have the list back? Let go, you idiot, you'll tear it. I've got to give it to Flinders-Crawford's father — Mr. Coker said so."

"I wish Pritchard was here. Did he say why he wasn't going to score?"

"He's watering his garden."

"*Watering*? What on earth for?"

"I dunno. Oh, heavens! They've started. That was a wide. Did you get that wide?"

On the other side of the field spectators began to gather. The wives and mothers of the teams were already there, settled for the afternoon on deck-chairs in advantageous positions under the few trees that bordered the edge of the field. The newcomers were less fortunate, and were obliged to sit behind them in the sparser shade of the outer branches or to endure the full heat of the summer sun in the intervening spaces. Rugs had been thrown down, and on these younger brothers and sisters of the boys disported themselves, paying no attention to a game they did not understand and becoming very dishevelled and hot as they rolled over one another.

Jill Wintringham had established herself early with Nanny in attendance,

and Hermione and Brenda acting as escort to her older children. The baby, being considered too young for cricket, had been left in the anxious charge of his grandmother.

"Nicky, you can't climb this tree. The trunk is too slippery."

"I can if 'Mione gives me a start. Lift me up, 'Mione."

"No, I won't. I'm jolly glad you can't get up by yourself."

Nicholas attacked her in revenge, throwing the full weight of his sturdy five-year-old body against her legs. She fell over and rolled on top of him.

"Don't squash him completely," warned Jill. But Nicholas had already squirmed from beneath his cousin and was off shouting, "Can't catch me, 'Mione! Bren, can't catch me!"

"Naughty boy," said Susan complacently. She sat on the edge of the rug near Nanny, pulling handfuls of grass and sprinkling them over her legs. "Naughty boy, Nicky. Susy, good girl," she added unctuously, sweeping the grass bits into the air so that some of them flew up in Nanny's face.

"Not so good as all that," snapped her victim. She lifted Susan further from the edge of the rug and dusted the rest of the grass off her.

"Mummy—knee," said Susan firmly, and getting up trotted to Jill's side.

David Wintringham came from behind the tree, pulling forward a chair.

"Your daughter looks as smug as ever," he remarked.

"I wish you wouldn't call her 'your' daughter. Our daughter."

"She's so exactly like you."

"I am never smug. You know perfectly well where that comes from. Why aren't you detecting?"

"You seem very keen on me taking this case. You used to be all jittery the minute I started, thinking the murderer would be sure to single me out for elimination directly I got too warm. Are you anxious to get rid of me?" He looked at her with burlesqued despair. "Is this the end?"

"Probably," Jill answered calmly. "What with the masters and the Shakespeare Players Ltd. there are so many young eligibles about I feel quite giddy. So apparently does our Miss Fawcett. She has taken possession of the handsome stranger and his own little friends are looking very very sour about it. Actually it's the best thing Ruth Fawcett has done for months. I must find Mr. Hill and see that he has a good view."

"No need. He is standing just behind us, glowering. Oh, well played, sir!"

A nice drive from Mr. Coker's bat smacked the boundary fence for four. Mr. Warwick who was umpiring waved his arm and the telegraph was unpicked with much rattling of the numbers and re-formed to make fifty. The last ball of the over went down, and the Denbury XI, looking rather disgruntled, changed across. Coker, the captain, threw the ball to Alastair Wintringham.

"Alastair's going to bowl now," said Jill rather obviously. "Nanny, Susan is wriggling like anything. Do you think it would be advisable to take her in? And I think you and she had better look for Nicholas afterwards. He went away with Hermione and Brenda."

Nanny removed her charge from Jill's knee, and led her, protesting and hanging back, towards the school. Her resistance was not overcome until a bribe was offered in the shape of a visit to the gardener's cat's kittens.

"Come on, Alastair," muttered David. "Get your father out! Hugh's made more than he deserves, but that semi-fast bowling the school have been putting down just suits him."

Alastair had reached the same conclusion, and moreover had not forgotten the many years of garden games at his own home. Instead of the pace he had begun to develop this term he bowled a slow careful straight ball of the kind that rises gradually and drops suddenly; an amateurish sort of ball, but deadly to the impatient batsman.

Hugh Wintringham, a little ashamed of his son's first effort, a little annoyed by it, stepped forward and lashed out. He missed, and the ball, hitting the ground with a dull thud, slid along it and found the middle stump. A roar of applause went up, Mr. Wintringham walked off very red in the face, and Alastair grinned sheepishly.

David rolled backwards and forwards, choking with joy. "He remembered!" he cried. "Good boy, Alastair! Poor old Hugh never could wait for a slow one. Many's the time I've— "

"Look, David, who's here," said Jill quietly. Long ago she had reached the conclusion that cricket is not a woman's game. But it was nice to have all the menfolk so happily occupied, and as long as she was not expected to watch every stroke she found that she could take an intelligent though remote interest. But that did not prevent her from keeping her eyes open, and while David was absorbed in the game and his memories of early days she had caught sight of a familiar quiet-faced man who was walking across the grass.

"It's Mitchell!" exclaimed David, turning round.

"Glad to see you," said the Inspector. "Please don't get up, Mrs. Wintringham. No, I won't sit down. I've come here to work, not to watch cricket. Very pleasant surroundings, I must say."

"Did you know I was here?" asked David, rather crestfallen. He had hoped to make his presence a surprise.

"Of course I did. The Headmaster asked for me on your recommendation. I nearly cried off when I heard that."

"But duty is duty, of course," added Jill.

"Just so, Mrs. Wintringham. The doctor knows where he gets off now though, don't you, Doc? I don't anticipate you giving me much trouble."

"I'm not so sure. And I may say I can be damned useful to you with this theatrical bunch. They are more likely to talk to me than to you. Superintendent Rogers got very little out of them."

"I don't know so much about that. I picked up his report on the way down; it seemed to have one or two useful pointers."

"Including an account of the P.M.?"

"Yes."

"I went over to Stanhurst for the P.M."

"I didn't think you would miss anything you could poke your nose into."

"Hear him!" said David bitterly. "The years have not mellowed him a scrap. He is his old obtuse self, or more so."

"You are not to run him down," protested Jill. "He is perfectly right to keep you in your place."

"Thank you." Inspector Mitchell bowed his acknowledgments to Jill and began moving away. But he stopped and came back.

"If you do happen to pick up anything useful," he said to David, "you'll find me in the museum. I'm going there after I've had a general look round, see?"

Though Jill had credited Miss Fawcett with an improved generalship in her campaign for the conquest of Mr. Hill's affections, in reality the initiative had been taken by Nigel Trent. He had watched the under-matron arrive supporting the convalescent Thurston, who limped slowly at her side. He had seen her arrange the cripple in a chair with his bandaged ankle supported on a cushion, and had admired her graceful movements as she did so. When the boy was surrounded by inquisitive friends and Miss Fawcett stood alone gazing at the match, he took action and appeared suddenly and quietly at her side.

"You have to work while others play?" he said.

Ruth Fawcett laughed.

"Do you mean bringing Thurston out? That wasn't very strenuous work. He was so thrilled at being let out of the San, poor kid. He had rather a nasty ankle. Dr. Mason had it X-rayed at the beginning; he thought there might be a fracture."

"Don't talk shop. Tell me about yourself. What do you do with your spare time?"

"I don't have much of it." Ruth Fawcett was surprised by his interest in her, but she remembered that she had always believed actors to be different from ordinary people, and was prepared to make allowances.

"I don't think you'd be interested," she said awkwardly.

"Yes, I should, intensely interested. Let me get you a chair. You don't have to rush off again, do you?"

"N—no. Not for a few minutes."

So Nigel fetched two chairs and put them close together. Soon Ruth Fawcett was telling him about her work and her training and her childhood and her hobbies and her friends, and in fact everything about herself except her all-consuming love for Mr. Hill, who stood some distance away with jealous rage mounting in his heart and blotting out the joys of this pleasant afternoon.

"How long have you been acting?" asked Ruth presently. She felt that she must lead the conversation away from herself or she would be in danger of saying things she would rather die than hear spoken aloud. There was something about this man that compelled her to talk. She might have known him for years. She felt confident, sure of his sympathy, warmed by his interest and vicariously flattered by the admiration that sprang into every face that passed by. But her girlhood's inhibitions, so painfully acquired, were strong. She must draw back and make him talk in his turn.

"I've been acting since I left school," answered Nigel smiling. She was really very sweet, if a little simple. He must try to teach her how to bring the boy-friend up to scratch. In most walks in life she wouldn't have needed any technique; the competition on the other side would have been too strong; she could have sat back and taken her choice. He began to talk to her about his life on tour.

Mr. Dewhurst was already installed in the deserted Masters' House when George Lemming, warned of his arrival, hurried in. In an atmosphere of the deepest gloom they began to discuss the situation.

"It's a pity the doctors didn't stick to their original diagnosis," exclaimed Dewhurst in a despairing voice. "It wouldn't have made any difference to poor old Bob."

"That would have been impossible," answered Lemming. "There would have been a post-mortem anyhow, and they were bound to see what had happened when they took the bandage off."

"I suppose so." Dewhurst bit his nails and moved restlessly in his chair. "It's you being hung up here that is going to play Old Harry with the whole concern. The other companies are all fixed up; I can't give them any of your bookings. It's a dead loss every day you are here."

"To-morrow is Sunday," remarked George Lemming. But the manager would not accept even this modicum of comfort.

"What of it?" he demanded angrily. "You ought to be on your way to Exeter to-morrow for Monday's performance. Even if this business is cleared up to-day, and it looks precious little like being cleared up at all, you won't

have time to get there from here. Which means another cancelled booking. Not to mention the adverse publicity; that's going to have a bloody bad effect on these schools and colleges. You know what they are."

"It isn't in the papers yet," said Lemming hopefully.

The manager snorted and was silent for a few minutes. When he spoke again it was in a quieter tone.

"Who do you think did it, George?" he asked.

"No idea." The stage-manager was not going to express an opinion. "It might have been one of several. As you know, all the cast except myself are off at the end of the play. Actually I was on the stage or in the wings from the end of the first interval onwards, with one short break. Edward reminded me of it, and I must go and tell this Scotland Yard Inspector about it. I said to the Superintendent that I had not left the stage at all after the first interval. Really I was away from it for about three minutes before I made my last entrance with Malvolio's letter. I went outside for a breath of air, and walked round into the front drive. You know what a stifling night it was."

"Were any of the others about?"

"Yes. I remember seeing Edward when I was going back on to the stage. He reminded me of it this morning; I told you."

"I don't like that boy's appearance to-day. He seems to have taken the whole business to heart more than any of you."

"He's very highly-strung. He's the only real actor we've got in the cast now that Bob's gone."

"Poor old Bob. He was one of the old gang. Never let me down. Do you know he hasn't missed a single performance with this company since he joined it."

"That's remarkable. Well, he only missed the very last moments of this one."

"Did the audience make any comments on that?"

"Not that I've heard. They probably didn't notice."

Mr. Dewhurst looked scornful.

"Very likely not. Well, I must be off and see this Inspector Mitchell, I suppose. Though I don't know what I can tell him."

George Lemming did not get up. He wanted a little more direction as to his future course.

"Don't go yet. You've got to tell me what to do next."

"How can I? It all depends on— "

"All right. Then we stay put here. As long as I know what's expected of me." He raised his eyes to the manager's face. "And what about our Sonia?"

"Ah." Dewhurst dropped back into his chair. "She's a problem and no

mistake."

"She's a menace," said George gloomily. "She's taken to her bed and begins crying if you speak to her. It isn't as if she had been all that fond of Bob. She's been casting her eyes elsewhere ever since I've known her—first one and then another."

"It's young Nigel at present, isn't it?"

"I believe so—as far as she's concerned, anyway. But that needn't make her go into hysterics when she's told to get up and behave normally."

"Did you tell her that? You're a brave man."

"Not in so many words. But I'd like to know her object in doing it. It's not grief, so what?"

"Perhaps she wants to give the impression of grief."

"Maybe. But I doubt it." He did not add that in his opinion Sonia Fenton's condition was due to fear. Instead he got to his feet and walked with Dewhurst in the direction of the museum. They stopped at the door of it and the manager put his hand encouragingly on Lemming's shoulder.

"You're a good boy, George," he said cheerfully. "I feel I can leave this end safely in your hands. I've got to get around a lot before Monday; that is if this cop will let me go, and I can't think there is any point in keeping me here. So I probably shan't see you again till then. I propose to make what rearrangements I can, and give you a date not too far from here."

"And what about the cast? Will you send us someone to take Sir Toby, and Bob's other parts, or do you want me to start shifting people round?"

"I don't know. How can I decide till I know who you will still have at the end of it all?"

"Exactly." The two men looked at one another. The same thought was implied in what each had said. If the police were successful their company would sustain another loss.

"Well, I'm glad to have seen you," said George. "I got a bit nervous when you didn't ring through till this morning. If you'd had an accident on the way down it would have been the last straw."

"It was only a puncture," answered Dewhurst. "It made me rather late getting in to Eastbourne. But chiefly I didn't want to rouse the school to answer the telephone in the early hours of the morning."

"We weren't so soundly asleep as all that," said George Lemming, and remembered the long hours during which he had lain awake listening to Lionel Bassett turning and twisting on his improvised bed.

Mr. Dewhurst went into the museum and Lemming turned towards the cricket field. The number of the spectators had grown, so that they now stretched the whole length of the school side of the field. The Fathers' tail were batting, valiantly trying to recall what little skill they had formerly

possessed, panting up and down the pitch with streaming faces and stiff limbs, but adding their ones and twos to the score, which stood at 95 for 8.

As George Lemming watched from the corner of the field near the drive he felt a hand on his arm. Gash was beside him.

"Has Dewhurst gone?" he asked.

"He's with the Inspector. After that if he's allowed to he's going. He wants to try and fix things for us for next week. He has left me in charge here. What do you want to see him about—anything important?"

"It's important to me," answered Gash, with a smouldering light of anger in his eyes. "Just that my last week's pay envelope has disappeared."

"When?" George Lemming's voice was hard.

"How do I know? I put it in my inside coat pocket yesterday at the end of the first interval. I didn't look for it till to-day, till just now, to be exact. It isn't there."

"Oh God! Another!… It's no good telling me. You'd better go and explain to the cop. I can't do anything about it."

"I just thought you'd like to know," answered Gash and walked swiftly away.

George Lemming watched him with a thoughtful expression in his shrewd eyes.

By tea-time the Fathers' side were all out, with the very creditable score of 105. Both teams and all the visitors made their way to the school Hall where tea was spread on long tables. The rest of the school took lemonade in the school dining-room, their real tea not being due until six o'clock.

As they joined the stream moving slowly into the school, Jill Wintringham pulled her husband's sleeve.

"Those poor young things are looking so forlorn," she said, nodding her head in the direction of the Shakespeare Players Ltd. "I'm sure they are too shy to come in to tea. Don't you think you had better rescue them? You might hear something to your advantage."

"Not from that bunch," answered David. "Those are the sheep, snowy and innocent, as separated by Superintendent Rogers. But as you say they had better have tea."

He left Jill and approached the group who were still sitting on the ground trying to look as if they were meant to be there.

"What about a spot of tea?" he asked pleasantly.

"Oh, Doctor!" Plump Joan Carson scrambled to her feet. "Thank you for those kind words. Our tongues are hanging out. Hilary and I were thinking we'd have to go and beard Sonia in her den."

"I wouldn't do that," said David. "Come along in before the parents demolish the eats entirely."

He led the way with the two girls and the men, after some hesitation, followed sheepishly. David took them to a comparatively empty corner of the Hall near the stage and went away to collect cups of tea for the two girls. When he came back he found them bunched together more closely than before, a silent and despondent little crowd.

"Now," he said to the two girls: "Drink that up and don't look as if you expected to be thrown out any minute. The Headmaster knows it isn't your fault you're stuck here. Doesn't he, Judith?" he went on, intercepting his sister-in-law as she passed by.

"Who doesn't what?" inquired Judith vaguely. Then grasping the situation with trained rapidity she gave her best social smile. "I'm so glad David brought you in to tea. I ordered some for you in the Masters' House, but perhaps Winnie didn't understand. Are you enjoying the match? We are very lucky to have such a fine day, aren't we?"

She moved on and the players looked at David with reproachful eyes.

"That's torn it," said Hilary Stocton. "We never even went to see if there was any tea at the Masters' House. We didn't expect to be given any."

"Never mind. You aren't all here. Probably the others will take advantage of Mrs. Redesdale's staff work."

"Do you think we had better go over and see?"

"No, stay where you are till you've finished. Unless you want to join the others."

"I don't particularly." Hilary glanced at Joan.

"Nor me. I don't mind telling you, Dr. Wintringham, I'm scared stiff of this business."

David took a swift look round. Parents were all about them, talking to one another, talking to the two teams, talking to the masters. They did not appear to notice the presence of the strangers, but the suppression of obvious outward curiosity was part of their normal behaviour and their well-bred seeming indifference could not be relied upon. It was not safe to discuss recent events in such company. As he hesitated he saw Hermione Redesdale slipping towards him through the crowd. He made up his mind.

"We'd better not talk here," he said in a low voice to Hilary. "But I'd like to have a word with you two outside, if you've finished."

He took their cups and turned to deposit them on the nearest table. As he did so Hermione squirmed her way to his side.

"Uncle David!"

"Hullo, Hermione! Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes. I wish you'd tell Nicky he's not to put his head through the fence.

He kept doing it and got stuck, because his ears are so big, and stick out such a lot. Nanny had an awful time getting them out backwards."

"Was he damaged?"

"No, I don't think so. His ears went very red. He cried."

"You are a heartless little beast. Poor old Nicholas. What is he doing now?"

"Eating his tea. Uncle David!"

"Well?"

"Alastair said I was to tell you he wanted to talk to you before they started playing again."

"What does he want to talk to me about?"

"I don't know. I expect it's about the murder."

"The *what*?" David was genuinely startled. The school could not possibly know what had happened, yet here was the Headmaster's daughter calmly stating in her clear child's voice that his nephew wanted to discuss the crime with him.

"Oh, well." Hermione was embarrassed. "Alastair will say himself. Will you look out for him?"

"I'll see him sometime. But Hermione!"

"Yes, Uncle David."

"If you know what you're talking about keep your mouth shut till I've seen you and Alastair about it. I'm busy just now."

"All right. I'll tell Alastair."

David caught up the two girls at the far end of the Headmaster's garden.

"We thought you were never coming."

"My small niece-in-law caught me. Now tell me why you are scared."

"Well." Hilary stopped short and looked at Joan. The latter nodded encouragement. "The thing is so many of us had a grudge against Bob Fenton. He got up against nearly all the men in turn, and specially Nigel, Edward and Lionel. It isn't very nice for us girls having all those suspects loose about the place. If the right one got to know what Joan heard, she might be silenced the same way Bob was. That's why she didn't tell the Superintendent."

"Don't!" Joan Carson shivered.

"So she hasn't breathed a word of it except to me, but we think you are to be trusted and won't let it out to the wrong people."

"Now what," said David firmly, "did Joan hear, and when?"

"She heard—"

"I'll tell him." Joan stood still and looked at David, her round blue eyes becoming very serious with the effort of concentration. "It was after the

second interval. I don't come on till after Bob and Lionel do their fight with Sebastian and go off. I had just gone back to our dressing-room to get a handkerchief. Most of the cast were in their places either on the stage or in the wings. I wanted to ask Edward something and I had seen him go into the museum just before the end of the interval, so I went across to the door. Just as I got there I heard Bob say in a very angry voice '*So it's you, is it*?' I didn't like to go in on account of his tone of voice, so I went back to the stage. That's all."

"So it's you, is it?" David repeated the words slowly. "At the time what did you think he meant by that?"

"Well." Joan looked uncomfortable. "You know I had my ring pinched. I thought Bob had found the person taking something else."

"But there was no answer? You don't know who Fenton was speaking to?"

Joan Carson shook her head.

"No, there was no answer."

CHAPTER VII

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Mr. Dewhurst settled himself into the driving seat of his car.

"I think this is very handsome of you, Inspector," he said gratefully. "I thought you were sure to keep me here. I don't mind telling you my affairs are very rocky as a result of this business. We just about pay our way normally, and here I've got this company bogged, and a dead loss. It'll take me all my time to keep my head above water, but there's a chance I can do it as long as I am able to get around."

"As you weren't here when it happened your case is different to the others," replied Mitchell. "And I know where to find you any time."

"That's right. And don't forget you've just taken my finger-prints. That ought to satisfy you." The two men laughed. Dewhurst thrust his arm out of the car window and shook hands warmly. "I'll ring you to-night and to-morrow morning, and I'll be back early Monday unless you send for me sooner. Good luck, Inspector. The sooner you finish this case the better I'll be pleased."

The gravel spurted from beneath his car wheels as he drove rapidly down the drive, paused for a bare two seconds at the gate, and swung out into the road.

"What they call a live wire," said Inspector Mitchell sadly as he turned back towards the museum.

When he reached the door he stopped dead. The constable on duty there had disappeared. In Mitchell's pocket lay the key with which he had locked this door on leaving it with Dewhurst five minutes before. Now he saw that the door was not only unlocked, but unfastened, and from the inside of the museum came the sounds of someone moving about. Inspector Mitchell swore softly and went in.

A man was stooping under the cases at the far end of the room, apparently searching for some object beneath them. He had grey hair and was dressed in a dark suit; the Inspector had never seen him before. He paid no attention to the opening and shutting of the door, being apparently absorbed in his own activities.

"Who are you?" said Inspector Mitchell sternly. "And what are you doing here?"

The man turned slowly, his back still bent, his expression indifferent.

"I might ask you that," he answered, turning away again, "since I am a

master at the school and have every right to go to any part of it as I please."

Mitchell produced his warrant card.

"This is who I am," he said. "And I'll trouble you to have a few words with me if you don't mind."

Though he spoke mildly there was a ring of authority in his voice that made the other man stand erect to face him.

"Now," said the Inspector. "Perhaps you'll tell me who you are."

"I have already told you. I am a master here, a temporary master. My name is Schofield."

"How did you get in? I left this door locked five minutes ago and an officer in charge."

"The officer is along the drive near the Headmaster's garden or was when I came in. One gets a distant view of the cricket-field from there. I took the duplicate key of course. Every room in the school has two keys. In some rooms the keys are not used at all. The museum on the other hand is always locked at night because it opens into the drive. Its key therefore might be lost or damaged and the duplicate key is always available to the masters."

"You have this second key?"

"Naturally." Mr. Schofield took it with some reluctance from his pocket and handed it to the Inspector.

"And now tell me what you are looking for?"

"Why?" Mr. Schofield's face set into an angry frown. "You have no possible justification for interfering with my activities. Confine yourself to your job and I will attend to my own business."

"I don't like your tone at all," said Inspector Mitchell, whose patience was evaporating. "You know, or you ought to, that a man was killed last night in this very room. Whether it was murder or manslaughter we don't know yet, but whichever it was it is a serious crime, and it is the duty of everyone in the school to give us what assistance they can."

"I can give you no assistance," said Mr. Schofield steadily. "The man who was—killed—had no connection with the school. You will probably find the cause of his death in his own past."

"Nevertheless I must ask you to tell me what you were looking for when I came in here and found you."

Mr. Schofield suddenly lost his temper.

"Damn your bloody interference!" he shouted, and swooping under the museum cases plucked out a heavy Indian club and brandished it over his head. "I came for my clubs—Indian clubs—clubs to do exercises with. Ever heard of Indian clubs? Well, I use them every day in my own room, but I happened to bring them down yesterday to compare their weight with the School Sergeant's pair, and I left them in here. Will that do, or do you want to

know the name of the man who made them?"

He thrust the club into Mitchell's hand and stood glaring at him.

"You can keep your shirt on," said the Inspector, roused in his turn. "You've no call whatever to fly off the handle just because you're asked a civil question. And there is one thing more I would like to know."

"Well?"

"*Where is the fellow to this club?*"

All Mr. Schofield's anger faded out of his face, leaving it tired and old. He made a little helpless gesture with his hands.

"I can't find it," he said.

Inspector Mitchell's eyes narrowed,

"You can't find it? But you found the pair to it. Are you sure you left both clubs in here?"

"Of course I am. You can ask the Sergeant. He was here with me looking at them."

"Very well. You left them here and now you come to fetch them. You don't ask my permission to come on to the scene of the crime, you sneak in when my back is turned. And one of your precious clubs has disappeared. I wonder if it would be news to you to hear that we've got this single club on our list of objects found here last night and left in the positions where found. But we haven't seen anything at all of the other club."

"One of the boys has probably taken it. I left them both on one of the cases. This one had no right to be lying on the floor. I shall speak to the Headmaster and see what he can do about it."

"You'll speak to me," said Inspector Mitchell. "There are several things I'd like to know about you. For instance, where were you during the performance last night? In the audience?"

"No. I was in my room."

"Alone?"

"Naturally."

"You never left it the whole evening?"

Mr. Schofield hesitated.

"I left it for a time. I went out into the grounds. It was a very hot evening; I wanted some fresh air."

"Anyone see you go out?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but Mr. Cranston, one of the other masters, was on the front steps as I arrived there. I think he had been seeing someone off."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Yes." Mr. Schofield pressed his thin lips together; his eyes were hard.

"Very well. I'll see you again later."

"Can I take my club?"

"No. I'm afraid I can't let anything go from this room at present. And next time you want to do any snooping in here, just let me know first, will you?"

Mr. Schofield shrugged his shoulders and went to the door. As he opened it three boys stood aside to let him pass.

"Hullo!" said Inspector Mitchell. "What are you folks doing?"

The trio stepped inside the door. One held half a brick, another had a chipped gardener's hone, and the third carried a decayed mallet.

"We are looking for Inspector Mitchell," one of them said.

"Well, that's me." The Inspector smiled kindly. "Now tell me what you want."

During the tea interval Mr. Warwick heard of the arrival of Inspector Mitchell. He went at once to the museum, where he found the Inspector turning over a miscellany of strange articles arranged on the top of one of the cases. Mitchell looked at him warily.

"I was afraid it might be another lot of them," he said.

Mr. Warwick, who as umpire was due back on the cricket-field in ten minutes' time, ignored this cryptic remark. He explained who he was and went on to describe his conversation with the housemaid Winnie. Mitchell listened with polite attention to the account of Billy Oldfield's disability and unstable ways, but he did not take this fresh suspect very seriously. In nearly all the rural cases he had dealt with sooner or later a mental deficient had come into the picture, and in no case so far in his experience had they any real connection with the crime. On the other hand this boy might have sufficient intelligence to recollect what had happened, and since he had apparently been on or near the scene of the present crime at the approximate time of its occurrence, it was just possible that he might have seen or heard something helpful.

So Inspector Mitchell wrote down Billy Oldfield's name and address and thanked Mr. Warwick for his information.

"By the way," he went on. "You have a temporary master here for this term, Mr. Schofield. Has he ever been here before in that capacity?"

"No." Mr Warwick looked surprised. "Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered if he was well-known to you all."

"No. We've never had him before. And he is certainly not well-known to us. Personally— "

Mr. Warwick stopped. In his long-standing general irritation with Schofield's behaviour he had said more than he intended.

"Go on," Mitchell encouraged him. "Anything you say to me is in strict confidence. And I have a reason for asking you; it's not idle gossip."

Mr. Warwick smiled. He rather liked this quiet sensible policeman, so unlike the local Stanhurst product.

"He's very difficult to get to know," he explained. "And has a very brusque way of talking which has got our backs up a bit. But he teaches well, and I believe the boys respect him if they don't much like him."

"I see. Now can you tell me how he took the news of this affair last night?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I didn't see him at all last night."

"But you had four of the cast billeted on you. There must have been a considerable disturbance at the Masters' House when they were being settled in."

"Yes, there was. Now I come to think of it, all of us who live there except Schofield were out helping. I was still up because I was acting as liaison with the company, but Hill and Lawes came out of bed to help."

"And Mr. Schofield did not?"

"No. Actually I don't think he heard of the business at all until breakfast time this morning."

Warwick described Schofield's strange and embarrassing behaviour when the presence of the actors was explained to him. Mitchell listened with great interest and finally consulted his note-book. Mr. Warwick looked at his watch; he was impatient to get back to the match.

"Thank you," said the Inspector at last. "You want to be off back to the game. Perhaps you would be good enough to tell Mr.—er—Cranston that I should like to have a word with him. Or I can send one of my men if you haven't time."

"No, that's all right," answered Mr. Warwick. "I'll tell him."

Sadly Mr. Cranston detached himself from the deck-chair he had drawn up beside Jill Wintringham. He had been enjoying the match very much. In the first place the Fathers had put up a very good show batting. Mr. Coker had made sixty-four and was run out through no fault of his own. He had been a fine bat in his day and was still very pretty to watch. In the second place the spectators were on this occasion unusually well-behaved and quiet. The restlessness, the constant scufflings, the incessant running about of small boys unable to be still for more than two minutes at a time, were on this afternoon more subdued, less apparent. And Mr. Cranston, too much absorbed in the game and too unscientific by nature to investigate this phenomenon, accepted it and was simply grateful. If, as Jill Wintringham did, he had looked about him, he would have discovered that the quiet well-behaved audience who sat under the trees and talked together in low cultured voices consisted almost

entirely of parents and friends of the school. A few of the younger boys lay on rugs, the very young visiting children played beside them, but the bulk of the school was unexpectedly and mysteriously absent.

Mr. Cranston lingered for a minute leaning on the back of the chair he had left. Play was about to be resumed after the interval. Coker Major and a boy called Howard had just gone out to bat. They looked ridiculously and pathetically small standing at either end of the pitch surrounded by the Fathers. But though these giants were bulky they were no longer nimble. They hemmed the boys in like a forest of tall trees, but like a forest they were stationary and Coker Major, looking about him with a calculating eye, noted the position of the gaps and set himself to play accordingly.

The first ball was bowled; Coker blocked it carefully. The giants swayed on their feet, but not one became uprooted. The bowler plunged up the pitch and recovered the ball. He returned to his position wriggling his stiff shoulders.

Mr. Cranston tore himself away and presently was seated in the museum describing his own behaviour of the night before. Mitchell noted that the master's story agreed with Dewhurst's account of his own movements, but he had expected this and passed on to his encounter with Schofield. He found Mr. Cranston reluctant to go into detail, and pressed for the reason of this.

"I find it very distressing," said Mr. Cranston, "to discuss the doings of other people. I should much prefer it if you would ask Schofield himself. I personally feel that as he is only a temporary master here we should treat him as a guest, and as such show him more consideration rather than less."

"In ordinary circumstances, perhaps," said Mitchell gravely. "But you must remember that a life has been taken, whether in a fit of uncontrolled temper or by deliberate design we do not yet know. That alters everything, to my mind."

Mr. Cranston nodded, his face full of pain.

"You are right, of course. I think I hesitate because Mr. Schofield did surprise me by his behaviour. He was unusually violent in his manner, he seemed to be suffering from some intense emotion, and he was absurdly—I should almost say, *shocked*, only that sounds ridiculous—by a very innocent remark of mine."

"Can you remember exactly what you said?"

"Yes, because I have thought about it so often since then, wondering why he took it as he did. I was trying to chaff him for not attending the play, and as I also had avoided it I said, 'Are you a deserter too?' He glared at me as if I had hit him and said, 'What?' in a most extraordinary tone of surprise and anger and—well—almost despair. It has worried me since very much indeed," finished Mr. Cranston, taking out his handkerchief and wiping his face.

Inspector Mitchell made a note of the conversation and sat frowning into

the distance.

"How is Mrs. Fenton?" he asked suddenly.

Mr. Cranston jumped.

"Mrs. Fenton?—Oh, the widow. Yes, well, I'm afraid I don't know. I have not seen her at all since last night when she came to our house. I believe she is prostrated, poor thing. But my sister would be able to tell you."

"Right." Inspector Mitchell led the way to the door. Mr. Cranston hurried off, hoping he had not missed too much good play. The Inspector stood in the doorway, gazing up at the cloudless blue sky.

"If you've finished grubbing round that shanty, Doc," he called, "you might come and report to me. I hear you've been interviewing the younger talent."

"Who told you that?" said David Wintringham, on hands and knees, putting his head out of the boot-room door.

The two men lit cigarettes and sat down. David waited for the Inspector to begin. At last the latter said, "You were over at the post-mortem this morning. Make anything of it?"

"He had a lacerated wound of the scalp about two inches long, a small fissured fracture under that, and considerable haemorrhage inside the skull from a tear in the meninges."

"That's the brain, is it?"

"The covering of the brain."

The Inspector looked puzzled.

"But I thought his symptoms were those of a cerebral haemorrhage, apoplexy, stroke, or whatever else you call it."

"So they were. The symptoms in apoplexy are produced by the pressure on and consequent injury to certain parts of the brain by bleeding inside it. The same thing can be produced by haemorrhage just outside the same areas. It's called compression, which describes exactly what it is."

"I see. Could anything have been done if you had discovered it sooner?"

"No. We had ordered the ambulance immediately. If he had lived to reach the hospital a piece of bone would have been removed from the skull in the hope of finding and stopping the haemorrhage and relieving the pressure. But he died before he could be moved. There was nothing we could have done here."

Inspector Mitchell nodded.

"Find anything else?"

"Oh, the high blood-pressure story was supported by the state of his arteries. But he wasn't worse than a lot of men at his age. There was nothing

that should have been immediately dangerous to him. In fact he seems to have had remarkably few illnesses for a man of his profession, knocking about as he did, and working so damned hard."

David flicked off his ash on to the floor.

"How are you really getting on, Mitchell?" he asked. "You aren't going to ride the official high horse, are you? Because I've got a very nice clue for you, which I am prepared to barter for a brief statement of the present position."

"I'll have your nice clue first, if you don't mind," answered Mitchell. "Then I'll see."

So David obediently related his conversation with Joan and Hilary, including the former's description of what she had heard outside the museum door.

" 'So it's you, is it?' " repeated Mitchell. "Sounds as if he'd spotted the thief, doesn't it?"

"It might mean that."

"What else could it mean?"

"Well, the actual words only suggest that he found someone in the museum and was surprised to find who it was. It would have been a perfectly natural remark if there had been no thefts. Only of course as we know there had been some, we read them into it. But I don't see much point in speculating about why Fenton said that. What we want to know is—who did he say it to."

"That's right." Inspector Mitchell turned the pages of his note-book thoughtfully.

"The trouble with this business isn't so much the length of time involved, because that is very short. Fenton left the stage about seven to ten minutes before the end of the play and went to the museum. Counting the curtain-calls and delay before he was found, we get about twenty minutes. That ought to narrow things down a bit but it doesn't. It eliminates a few members of the cast who are proved to have been on the stage, but the others were on and off all the time. Must be a rum sort of a play with all this jack-in-the-box business."

"Shakespeare never has an idle stage," answered David. "But it isn't as jerky as these times of yours suggest. This was a much cut version; made to play two hours with two short intervals. Go down to the Old Vic sometime and see the real thing for yourself."

"Gercha!" said Inspector Mitchell, He dug a row of small dots along the top of a clean page. "One of them is wrong," he said. "And the one who gives the best impersonation of a liar is Bassett. I'd pick him for the thief, other things being equal. There was trouble in that other company he went to for a while. He had the longest opportunity here too, because he went off at the end of his last scene with Fenton. He says Fenton went into the museum while he

stayed at the stage-door. But he might have gone there with him, hit him a crack and gone back again inside a minute. There was no one to see him, apparently."

"Except George Lemming," said David, who had drawn his chair closer and was also looking at the notes.

"He says he went into the front drive," argued Mitchell. "He wouldn't have seen or heard anything from there."

"What about the beautiful young man?"

"He says after his exit he stayed with Bassett on the stage steps. Their statements agree here, but that isn't the point. I should expect Bassett to be there for Trent's exit, which was some time after his own. He would have had time to do in Fenton before Trent came off the stage."

"What about Gash?"

"Now you're talking. To my mind there is something very fishy about Mr. Edward Gash."

"Beyond his temperament, do you mean?"

"Now don't you let loose any of your high-faluting psycho-stuff on me yet. It may be complexes on the part of young Gash, but it looks to me like ordinary honest-to-God guilty conscience. He says he can't remember exactly what he did after leaving the museum at the end of the second interval until his last appearance. He walked about outside, he thinks. And he went off on his own again when Lemming was singing at the end of the show. Got back just in time for the curtain-calls, so the others say. Bassett doesn't remember seeing him; nobody recollects seeing him during this time. Convenient memories, I call them. Then look at his behaviour after Fenton was found. If Master Gash didn't take that opportunity to dispose of the weapon, how did he spend the time?"

"Being sick, I think," said David. "You know, you're prejudiced. I admire Gash's acting very much indeed, so of course you will say the same of me. I should hate to think that the theatre might lose such a promising actor. I think his behaviour was quite consistent with his state of agitation over Fenton, and his ardent desire to avoid any further clash with him during the evening."

"Does that include dashing off when Fenton was incapable of continuing the quarrel?"

"Of course it does. Probably he had been wishing with all his heart that Fenton might go to the devil. Suddenly to find him well on his way there would be a frightening and sickening shock to a man as sensitive as he is. Besides, I thought we were agreed that the murderer is almost certainly the same man as the thief. Didn't Gash report his salary was stolen?"

"He failed to report it until to-day," answered Mitchell scornfully. "When he'd had time to think it over. That's a very old gag, you know."

They were silent, each pursuing his own thoughts. “I don’t see where Joan’s bit of evidence comes in,” said David presently. “Fenton said to Mr. X, ‘So it’s you, is it?’ ”

“Who’s Mr. X?”

“My dear Mitchell, if I knew that I wouldn’t call him Mr. X. This isn’t a blackmail case.”

“Right. Go on.”

“The unknown made no answer as far as Joan heard. She went back to the stage, so did Fenton a bit later. Now why did Mr. X let him go so quietly?”

“Stunned, perhaps, by being discovered. After thinking it over he thought he’d better get rid of Fenton quick before he told the others.”

“But Fenton might have told them at once.”

The Inspector frowned.

“It’s a point. But of course that remark may have meant nothing special. I’ll know better when I find out who was in the museum with Fenton when it was made.”

“And if no-one acknowledges being in the museum with him on that occasion?”

“Then I’ll know the liar of the party has added a piece to his repertoire.”

“You’re developing quite a feeling for atmosphere, aren’t you?” said David. “But that would be a negative result. According to your data who could have been in here then?”

“Bassett, Gash, and as an outside chance, Lemming.”

“Well.” David leaned back in his chair. “Doesn’t that narrow things down a bit? Find the weapon next, and it’ll be narrowed down still more.”

Inspector Mitchell got up and laid an Indian club before him.

“I’ve talked to you only about the company so far,” he said, “now I’m going to tell you a story about a schoolmaster.”

CHAPTER VIII

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Everyone was agreed that the afternoon could not have been finer in spite of the excessive heat and that the rain had kept off most providentially though it was so badly needed for the gardens.

The match was turning out most exciting. Howard made twenty-three runs and then was stumped by Mr. Coker when neglecting very carelessly to keep inside his crease. With his discomfited departure Alastair Wintringham came in to bat and it was not long before he and Coker Major, who was playing a magnificent game, ran up the score to sixty-nine. The Fathers began to look glum and the watching mothers were torn between pride in their sons and anguish for their husbands.

The chief sufferer among these was Colonel Flinders-Crawford. His size and weight entitled him to a place on the boundary and he was put at long on. But unfortunately Alastair's most successful drives found a spot half-way between Colonel Crawford and the square leg. After two collisions between the eager fielders in which the latter came off the worse, Colonel Crawford was left to tackle these shots as best he might, which he did by plunging at them with the ankle outstretched. Several times he was successful and suffered accordingly, especially as the ball always went in the same place, and so it was the right ankle each time that came in contact with it. Colonel Flinders-Crawford might of course have stooped to the ball, but encouraged by his army training he had early in life joined the ranks of the non-benders, and preferred sacrificing one joint to the alternative of tearing himself apart.

Poor Tuppy, thought Mrs. Flinders-Crawford, radiant in a linen suit and very smart hat, how he is suffering, poor dear. And that snotty little boy grins each time he gets a boundary.

As the ball again struck the Colonel's ankle and rebounded towards the wicket his wife averted her eyes from his martyrdom and surveyed the gathering with bored curiosity. Now who was that young man talking to the under-matron? She was sure she had seen him before; you couldn't forget a face like that, quite absurdly pretty for a boy. It was not her type of course, she liked something more amusing, but still…

"Mark!" she said to her son, who sat on the ground beside her. "Which of the masters is it talking to Miss Fawcett?"

"Where? Oh, that isn't a master, Mummy. You know who that is."

"I don't, or I wouldn't have asked you."

"It's the Duke."

"*Who*?" All Mrs. Flinders-Crawford's by no means negligible snobbery bounded at the word.

"In the play last night. The actor who did the Duke."

"Oh." Mrs. Crawford took an instant dislike to the young man who was not what he might, in some fairy prep school of her dreams, have been.

"What can he be doing here to-day, I wonder."

"They're all here. Look, there are some more of them, over in that corner!"

"Don't point, Mark. I don't understand it at all."

"They have to stay here, Wintringham said, because of the murder."

Mrs. Flinders-Crawford said, "Don't be silly, Mark," in her annoyed voice, so Mark did not try to explain further. His mother frowned at him and looked puzzled. She hoped Mark would grow out of this awful habit of saying the first thing that came into his head whether it made sense or not. She had heard that very small children did not know the difference between truth and falsehood, but she thought at Mark's age some advance might have been made. She must remember to discuss it with Tuppy. A burst of clapping gave her a renewed interest in the game. Her husband, stung by a further assault on his wounded ankle, had thrown the ball in straight and very nearly brought to an end the successful partnership at the wicket. The score now stood at eighty-one, but time was beginning to get short.

At the other end of the line of spectators Judith Redesdale sat down beside Mrs. Coker.

"Are your feelings very divided?" she said smiling.

"Terribly. I am trying to keep strictly neutral."

"Where are your other two? The whole family generally stick to you like leeches when you come down."

Mrs. Coker did not answer at once. Then she said, "I am probably being a traitor but I know I can trust you not to give me away to the boys, and I think you should know this. The school has apparently discovered about the unfortunate affair in the touring company."

"The school?" Judith was disagreeably shocked.

"Mind you, I don't expect all of them will have told their parents," went on Mrs. Coker. "My boys happen to tell me about their doings."

"But how on earth did they find out?"

"I don't quite know. I gather young Wintringham is at the bottom of it. We have always been told about his famous uncle, you know. They are taking it for granted that Dr. Wintringham is investigating."

"Well," answered Judith, "he is doing his best to help. But of course we have got the police here. You may have noticed some strangers about the

grounds. I may say they have been extraordinarily tactful. I believe they are looking for the weapon that was used. It's a perfectly horrible thing!" she ended, with a catch in her voice.

"I'm so very sorry," said Mrs. Coker, putting her hand over Judith's. "It is a shame at such a time, and coming upon you from outside like that—so utterly unexpected and from your point of view unpreventable."

"Thank goodness we have parents who look at it like that," answered Judith warmly. "You don't know what a blessing you are to us. I suppose this accounts for the boys being so quiet to-day. They are keeping their eyes open, watching the policemen."

"That will be it."

Judith sighed as she went away to find Mr. Redesdale. If only all the mothers were like Mrs. Coker. She passed Mrs. Billington-Smith with her son, now fully recovered from his lemonade excesses, sitting between her and her husband, bored and listless. They did not seem to have anything to talk to him about, nor he to them. She also passed her brother-in-law leaning against a tree in earnest conversation with Professor Pritchard. David raised his head and smiled at her as she went by, then turned back to his companion.

"By the by," he said when the Professor's discourse came to an end, "where's your boy? Scoring, I suppose? He has no right to neglect you like this."

"No, he isn't scoring this time," answered the Professor mildly. "I believe he is gardening."

"Gardening?"

"Well, perhaps not quite that. Actually he is watering the school gardens. I was directed to him by some of the boys when I couldn't find him after I arrived, and he told me he was conducting an experiment."

"What experiment?"

"He didn't say. Or rather," explained the Professor with his usual painstaking exactness, "he said he could not tell me what it meant at present, because it might not come off. A very common habit of experiments, as I told him. But he advised me to watch the match, which he thought might be interesting. I don't believe in crabbing other people's experiments and I know when I am not wanted, so here I am, and the match is *very* interesting," concluded the Professor, "from a biological point of view especially. Have you noticed that there are five pairs, I mean fathers and their own sons, playing? I have been watching them particularly; it has been most fascinating."

David laughed and looked at his watch. Twenty minutes to go and the school wanted thirteen runs. He thought he would just nip down to the gardens and speak to Bruce Pritchard and get back to see the end. After all Alaistair and Coker were still batting and should not take twenty minutes to

make thirteen runs. The result was in very little doubt. And he felt distinctly curious about young Pritchard's activities. He was a lad with ideas and the same capacity for working them out to the bitter end as that which had made his father famous. Also he was a friend of Alastair's, and Hermione's request, still unfulfilled, stuck in his memory.

But when he reached the school gardens they were empty. The small beds, laid out in rows, each belonging to two boys, were dark and sodden. The flowers drooped their heavy water-jewelled petals, the leaves lay flat, earth-spattered and limp. But Bruce Pritchard was nowhere to be seen.

Little Brenda Redesdale trotted quietly along the path behind the hedge that separated the lower end of the cricket field from the Cranstons' garden. She had enjoyed her tea very much and she wished to indulge Miss Cranston's canary with some very indigestible crumbs which she held tightly clutched in her small hand. She could hear the smack and thud of the game at her side, but could see nothing of it as her head did not reach above the top of the hedge. She was pleased at this because it meant that no-one from the other side could see her, and though she knew that Miss Cranston always made her welcome, she was aware that her mother discouraged too frequent visits, on the grounds that the Secretary must not be bothered. Which is silly, thought Brenda, because I know she isn't bothered generally, and when she is she says, Run along, Brenda, there's a good girl.

She found herself at the door of the cottage almost before she expected to reach it. It was open and seemed to be empty inside.

"I expect they are both at the match," thought Brenda. "So much the better."

She tiptoed into the sitting-room and, resisting the appeal of the china cottages and the china dogs, pushed a chair under the canary's cage and climbed up. From here she could reach, so she steadied the cage with the hand that held the crumbs and picking them off her palm with the other hand began to push them into the cage. The canary watched her with his head on one side. He knew her and was not alarmed, but he preferred to wait until he had the cage to himself again.

"Crumbs, Dicky!" said Brenda. "Eat my nice crumbs."

There was a startled exclamation from outside the room and a voice said breathlessly, "Who's that?"

Brenda tottered on her perch, letting go the cage which swung madly to and fro so that the terrified canary was flung from side to side and began to flutter wildly.

"Good God!" cried Sonia Fenton coming into the room.

"Oh heavens! You nearly made me fall off," said Brenda severely, making frantic efforts to steady the cage. "Can you stop the cage swinging, because

Dicky may get hurt, and the crumbs might fall out."

Sonia was so astonished that she did as she was told. Brenda got down from the chair and looked at her. She recognized the actress at once and decided that she preferred her on the stage. The cotton frock she wore was rather tight and had untidy limp organdie ruffles in front. Brenda thought it very inferior to her stage costume.

"Mummy said you were in bed," she remarked accusingly. "Are you better?"

The invalid's face reddened.

"How do you know who I am?"

"I was at the play last night. You aren't very different now except your clothes and your eyebrows aren't quite so black."

Sonia smiled. Of course, it was one of the Headmaster's little girls. An idea came to her.

"Do you remember all of us?" she asked sweetly.

"Well, the others are mostly out there watching the match, so I've seen them again."

"Do you think you know the one who was Duke Orsino?"

"Do you mean the Prince? Of course I know him; he is the handsome one. Why didn't you marry him?"

Sonia caught her breath, but Brenda did not wait for an answer.

"You were the Princess. You ought to have married the Prince. I thought it was all a silly muddle," she said.

"Well," answered Sonia, "I want you to take a note to the Prince. You needn't say the Princess sent you. Just give it into his hand. Will you be my little page, and do that for me?" finished Sonia archly.

Brenda considered, licking the remains of the crumbs off her palm.

"All right," she said. "Only don't tell Miss Cranston about me nearly falling off the chair giving Dicky crumbs. She might not like him being swung about."

While the note was being written she wandered about the room. When it was given to her she inspected it carefully. "Goodness! Doesn't your writing slope backwards! Miss Amery gets awfully ratty with Hermione if her writing slopes backwards. She says— " but Brenda preferred not to finish her sentence and ran off. Miss Amery had said that backward sloping writing was common.

"*Oi*!" called Sonia after her. Brenda came back slowly.

"Give it straight to Mr. Trent, won't you?"

"All right."

Brenda walked back to the cricket field. She saw Nigel Trent but she

wanted to tell Hermione first and display this feather of importance in her cap. She found her sister talking to her Aunt Jill. Nicholas and Susan had gone home with Nanny directly after tea.

"Hullo, Bren!" said Jill. "You're just in time. They've only got a quarter of an hour and five runs to make to win."

Brenda dragged Hermione behind Jill's chair and in a low voice hurriedly explained the situation.

"Shall I show it to Mummy first?" she asked.

"No," answered Hermione who was afraid her mother might be annoyed about the crumbs, "but we might tell Aunt Jill."

She stepped forward and was just starting a long description of Brenda's escapade when the most dramatic event of the match occurred with breath-taking speed.

Coker Major, taking chances with time so short, drove a straight ball to the off. It flew at considerable speed and with a slightly rising motion about two feet above the ground. Mid-off, who was a small father not hitherto conspicuous in the game, leaped sideways with outstretched hand. The ball, still rising slightly, struck his palm with such agonizing force that his fingers closed convulsively upon it and remained closed in a spasm of pain. A roar went up from the crowd and Coker, after a paralysed moment of unbelief, walked sadly away.

The Fathers too were paralysed. They had resigned themselves to defeat, they had decided that it was all for the best for the boys to win, because the little beggars enjoyed it so much. But this put new life into them. It was awe-inspiring; it was also magnificent cricket.

"Well played, sir!"

"Brilliant catch!"

"Where did you learn your cricket?"

"You're a dark horse, aren't you?"

The dark horse nursed his tingling palm and smiled idiotically. It was no good explaining to them that having been brought up abroad he had never, since the age of ten, played cricket at all. That would only shock them. So he continued to smile and they continued to stand round him congratulating him and wondering why they had not noticed him before.

The next member of the school team came in to bat. This boy had long ago given up all hope of doing so and in his agitation at being called upon suddenly to make five runs in nine minutes, hit wildly at his first ball and was out for a duck.

The pavilion was in a state of disorder and panic. The fifth man had not put on his pads, and the telegraph, after its long and peaceful progress marking up the tens, was flinging numbers about and shrieking for the score. Cries of

"Play up, Denbury!" came from across the field. In a mysterious fashion the whole school was back, lined along the boundary and shouting encouragement.

The fifth man ran to the wicket pulling on his gloves, his pads loose and flapping. He struck at the ball and missed it; so did Mr. Coker at the wicket.

"Come on!" yelled Alastair, already half-way down the pitch. One run sneaked, and four to make. The next ball to Alastair. It was bowled to the off but he swept it to leg with all the strength of his thin wiry arms. Colonel Flinders-Crawford hurled himself towards it, tripped and fell full length on his face. The ball struck the back of his right ankle, completing the circle of bruises there, and leaping into the air disappeared over the fence. Boundary. The school had won and there were three minutes to go.

"That *was* exciting," said Jill, looking about for David as the stumps were drawn at the end of the over. "I must go and congratulate Margaret and Hugh. What are they putting up now?"

"The final score," said Hermione. "A hundred and eight. They won by seven wickets in the end."

"Splendid. What were you telling me, Hermione?

Something about a note? Who for?"

"For Orsin . . For Mr. Nigel Trent."

"Well, there he is, over there with Miss Fawcett." Hermione handed the note back to Brenda whispering,

"You'd better take it to him. I can't make her listen."

When the last of the guests had walked or driven away down the drive Mr. Redesdale went to the museum. He was answering an urgent summons sent to him during the last moments of the match by Inspector Mirchell. His heart sank as he approached the door. Did this mean the end of the case, an arrest, and on Monday hideous publicity throughout the country? Or did it mean some sinister new development, a further entangling of his innocent establishment in this net of crime? Whatever it was, it was bound to be bad news, he reflected; there was no way out of this affair except through the outer darkness.

The museum door was opened for him by a constable. He found Inspector Mitchell making small crosses on a very large map of the school grounds. He looked up as the Headmaster entered and jumped to his feet.

"I hope my message wasn't inconvenient," he began, "but I wanted to see you as soon as possible. I shall need your co-operation."

"Have you found the—criminal?" Mr. Redesdale braced himself to bear the blow.

"No, not yet, I'm afraid. Plenty of information coming in. Only a question

of time, of course."

"Of course," agreed the Headmaster gloomily.

"No, what I wanted your help with is this."

The Inspector pointed to three of the museum cases on which were laid out three groups of miscellaneous objects. All were of a heavy and uncouth appearance, and they varied from stones and bricks to old tyre levers, railings, pickheads, spade handles and unidentifiable pieces of metal and wood.

"Found in your grounds," explained Mitchell with a wave of the hand. "You could start an annexe to this museum with them. Forty-three exhibits, all found in this area," and he laid his hand on the map of the school.

"Wha—what are they?" asked Mr. Redesdale nervously.

"You may well ask." The Inspector grinned. "Those objects represent the afternoon activity of the boys of your school, Mr. Redesdale. They were brought to me as 'blunt instruments used for the killing of Robert Fenton.' "

"The school!" said Mr. Redesdale faintly. "My wife told me they had got to know of it. But they have been told nothing whatever about the crime. Many of them have been away from the school with their parents. I can't understand it at all."

"It must have leaked out," said Mitchell. "If you ask me I think Dr. Wintringham's nephew may be at the bottom of it. He was trying to pump one of my men this morning."

"It is most unfortunate," went on Mr. Redesdale, "I suppose I ought to have given the school a short explanation of the facts. Of course they will have seen the theatrical lorry standing out here in the drive and have realized that the actors are still here. They must have seen them about the grounds too. But I didn't imagine it would be necessary to tell them at this stage."

"Well, I'd like you to do it now, if you please," suggested the Inspector. "And just tell the boys we want to locate the weapon ourselves, will you?"

"Yes, of course." Mr. Redesdale stared incredulously at the amazing collection before him. "Do you mean to tell me all this came out of the school grounds? I'll have to speak to the gardeners. I don't understand it."

"Oh, it's quite usual," answered the Inspector. "It always happens. You'd be surprised the rubbish people hoard, inside and out. And I don't know where the police would be if they didn't."

After the match was over David Wintringham found his wife, and explaining to her that he would not be ready to go home for at least another half-hour, suggested that she might pass the time in conversation with her sister.

"Thanks awfully," said Jill. "Judy is not the most invigorating company at the moment, poor darling. I promised mother we would be in to dinner, but as

long as you accept responsibility— ”

“I do—I do,” agreed David, hurrying off.

Jill watched him go with an indulgent smile. How he did love sleuthing, especially with Mitchell, who was of course a real lamb to let him. She hoped they would soon be successful; poor Judith was getting beside herself with worry. The strain of the week-end was beginning to show in her face, and that would never do. Jill blew a small kiss at her husband’s back and went into the school.

Going along the path towards the Masters’ House David caught up with Mr. Hill who was walking dejectedly in front of him. He answered David’s greeting and comments on the match with absent-minded vagueness. He had had a miserable afternoon watching Ruth Fawcett being entertained during all her free time by Nigel Trent. Twice he had tried to cut out the young actor, but in some curious way he had found himself eliminated on each occasion, while Ruth had grown prettier and more animated as the afternoon wore on. She had now gone in and the chances were very much against seeing her again that day.

When they reached the Masters’ House they found the entire Shakespeare Players Ltd., with the exception of Sonia Fenton, grouped languidly round the door. They evidently felt superfluous but did not know what to do with themselves. Mr. Hill, grasping the situation, roused himself with an effort.

“Hullo!” he said cheerfully. “What are you people all doing outside? You must be sick of standing about, I should think. Come along in and help me to find a drink.”

The actors smiled gratefully, and standing aside to let David and Mr. Hill go past, trooped in after them, and were soon more comfortably disposed about the sitting-room, being refreshed with glasses of sherry.

Mr. Warwick came in from the front drive where he had been saying good-bye to members of the Fathers’ team, and Mr. Lawes came down from his room where he had been writing letters.

“Where’s Schofield?” asked Mr. Warwick of the room in general.

“In his room,” answered Mr. Lawes. “Hasn’t budged all the afternoon.”

There were several other things he would have liked to say about Mr. Schofield, but the presence of the actors restrained him.

“I don’t think we’ve met him,” said George Lemming conversationally.

“Probably not,” answered Mr. Warwick, starting on his way upstairs to change out of his flannels. “And you haven’t missed much,” he added to himself outside the door.

“I think he must be the master we saw in the front hall the day we arrived,” volunteered Hilary. David was beside her instantly.

“Tell me,” he said in a low voice. “The others aren’t listening.”

She opened her eyes at him, but saw that he was serious and walked over to the open window followed by David and Joan Stocton.

"We had just got here," she said. "We were all in the hall waiting to see Mr. Redesdale. He arrived and shook hands with Bob, and then I noticed Sonia wasn't well. She had been laughing about something and all of a sudden she stopped with her mouth open and went very white. I thought she was going to throw a fit or something. I grabbed hold of her and looked round for assistance. All the others were being introduced by Bob to Mr. Redesdale and Mr. Warwick. But I saw this other master standing in the corridor, an oldish man with grey hair and a get-the-hell-out-of-here expression on his face. I tried to catch his eye to ask for help because Sonia was simply sagging on my arm and I thought she'd be on the floor any minute. Believe it or not, he just turned on his heel and sneaked off. Can you beat that!"

"He certainly does seem an elusive sort of bloke," said David thoughtfully. He wondered if Hilary were speaking the truth. She had it in for Sonia of course, on account of Nigel Trent. David had seen the look on her thin brown face when Nigel's clear voice rose over the rest of the conversation, and he had heard from Mitchell of the leading lady's supposed infatuation for the boy. Poor devil, thought David, he must have a dog's life, every woman in love with him, and every man suspicious.

Mr. Hill moved across to the window, so David left the girls in his care and threaded his way over to George Lemming's side. The little man was listening quietly to an argument between Edward Gash and Bassett about the lighting of plays.

"Isn't that your province?" asked David.

Lemming smiled.

"Yes, it is."

"Why don't you put them right?"

"I like to hear them talk. I have to fix the lights according to the kind of stage I get. Sometimes I can do what I've planned and what the producer wanted originally, but quite often I can't. Then I make the best of it. But Edward always has something worth listening to." He drained his glass, and as he turned to put it down said in a very different voice, "Have you got any further?"

"I don't know." David was cautious, but he realized the other's anxiety. "It wouldn't be my place to tell you, anyhow. You would have to see the Inspector. But there's one thing I'd like to ask you. You left the stage after your exit with Bassett and Fenton, when Sir Toby and Sir Andrew go off drunk. Fenton went to the museum, Bassett stayed at the stage door, you went into the front drive. Did you meet anyone there or in the grounds where you walked?"

"Not a soul."

"I see. Thanks."

David was about to continue his questions when Mr. Warwick appeared at his elbow and pulled him aside.

"What's up?" asked David. Mr. Warwick's face was grim; it was dear that something serious had happened.

"When I changed just before lunch I left my note-case in the breast pocket of my coat. It had six one pound notes in it. The note-book is still there now, but five of the notes have gone."

Mr. Warwick drew out the note-case as he spoke and handed it to David. The top note was in place, green and normal in appearance, but beneath it, falsely padding out the case to the expected size, were five pieces of blank paper.

CHAPTER IX

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With the departure of the parents immediately after the match was over the bell for school tea rang its welcome summons. The boys trooped into the dining-room and fell to with appetites enhanced both by the exhilarating finish of the game and their own unusually interesting activities. There were only a few of the younger boys who had not that afternoon imagined themselves human blood-hounds, and gone sniffing about in search of ill-defined but important clues. Few too who had not made an offering in kind at the altar of investigation. But it was remarked that the high-priest there, while giving a friendly welcome to early arrivals, had shown in the late afternoon a tendency towards lack of enthusiasm and curtness of speech. This was however in keeping with the normal uncertainties of adult behaviour, and in a way added to the Inspector's prestige. A certain amount of intimidation was expected of the Yard, and its absence would have been regretted.

Bruce Pritchard munched bread-and-butter steadily and in silence. He was very hungry after his prolonged physical and intellectual performance, and the success of his experiment added to the pleasant feeling of lethargy that was settling upon him. Later he must find Alastair and arrange an interview with the latter's Uncle David, and through him with Inspector Mitchell. He did not propose to take his treasure to the museum without an appointment; the Inspector might not be there, and no mere subordinate would do instead.

"I say," said Howard, his mouth full of currant bun, "did you see those men measuring the paths? What were they doing?"

"Making a plan of the school, I expect," answered Reeve. "Ordinary maps wouldn't mark it big enough. Anyway, they wouldn't have all the detail."

"I thought they might be making a plan. I wonder what for?"

"To find out where the murderer hid the weapon most likely."

"Did he hide it?"

"He must have, you idiot."

"I don't see why."

"Because Inspector Mitchell would have told us if he'd found it already, when we took our things to him. And some of the men were searching all the afternoon. I kept meeting them."

"He might not have wanted us to know."

Bonzo Taylor reached for another slice of bread-and-butter.

"You know that short one in the brown suit," he said to Reeve. "Well, he was in the Masters' House, just before the match began. I saw through the window when I was looking under the rockery stones on the bank near there. He was taking their finger-prints—all the actors, I mean."

"Gosh! That must have made the right one feel queer."

"They watched the match, didn't they?"

"Yes, I think so. Most of the time, at least. The tall funny one went back to the Masters' House after the tea interval. I didn't see him come out again."

"He was very good in the play, wasn't he?"

"Not as good as Sir Toby. It *is* a pity."

The two boys looked at one another and became grave. Of course the fact of the murder, so absorbing and exciting, made it difficult to remember that someone had been killed, but when they reflected that Sir Toby would never act again, they felt bewildered and rather embarrassed.

Appetites and jaws were beginning to flag when Mr. Redesdale came into the dining-room accompanied by a quiet-faced man whom the school instantly recognized with a thrill to be the Scotland Yard Inspector himself. As they rose to their feet eyes opened wide and necks craned to follow his progress up the dining-room to the Headmaster's table.

"Sit down, boys," said Mr. Redesdale.

When the scraping and pounding of chairs and the shuffling of feet stopped he went on.

"A very terrible and sad thing has taken place at the school. I think it is time I told you something about it. I had intended to wait, so that I could tell you a completed story. But as usual idle curiosity and gossip have been at work and you appear to have heard a garbled account of what has happened, and to have been influenced by morbid interest and the kind of literature many of you indulge in to come to several wrong conclusions. I think the only way to stop this is to ask Inspector Mitchell to give you an official account of the facts."

"I must say I was very surprised," began the Inspector, "to find all you boys so eager to help me. But I think your Headmaster and I both understand it in a way, though we don't like it, because you are much too young to be concerning yourselves with such a terrible thing as murder. But the point is this. I am here to investigate and I have assistants who are undertaking various routine and other jobs for me. If you start looking about and disturbing things you may hamper us very seriously in our work by destroying evidence that we might otherwise find. It is our duty to find out what happened when Robert Fenton was killed. Even if you were older, it wouldn't be your business to do so. I'm sure your parents would be very sorry indeed to see you mixing yourselves up in matters of this sort. It isn't what they sent you here for at all. So understand, once for all, I won't have any kind of interference, and I don't

want any help unless I ask for it. Now I'll tell you what happened. One of the actors you saw on the stage last night was found in the museum dying after the end of the performance. He had been struck on the head, probably with a blunt instrument."

The school looked at one another with bright eyes and nodded surreptitiously.

"He died," went on Mitchell, making his voice as impressive as possible, "and my duty is to find out who struck him. You boys may have got the idea from books and the pictures that a detective's work is all fun and excitement. Well, you can take it from me, once and for all, that in real life it isn't. It's hard work, very often difficult work, and nearly always dreadful work at some part or other of a case. This is a real life murder or manslaughter, it isn't a game at all. It's a matter of life and death. There's the death of this poor actor, and if I am successful, as I hope to be, there may be the criminal death by hanging of the man who killed him. So don't go away with the idea that you've got inside a thriller or a film. Try to realize what really has happened and keep right away from it in future."

There was a dead silence as the Inspector ended his speech. Mr. Redesdale said quietly, "Thank you, Inspector Mitchell. I am sure no boy can have failed to understand the position." He turned to the school. "No boy is to go to the Inspector again with anything he may imagine to be a clue, and the back drive from the corner of the San to the back gate is out of bounds for the time being. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir." A chorus of older boys answered in dutiful tones.

Mr. Redesdale and Inspector Mitchell left the dining-room together and a subdued school resumed its interrupted tea. But they were disinclined for more food and soon dispersed, to argue and discuss the case in small groups and low tones.

Bruce Pritchard went to his locker and crouching beside it gazed sadly at an object lying within swathed in an old piece of brown paper. He lifted the paper sideways and looked at the patches of yellow varnish showing through slime. The slime came from the bottom of the water-butt in which the object had lain until, running off the water, he had located and rescued it. Looking round to see if he were alone Pritchard pulled it out of the locker and turned it slowly over and over. He sighed deeply, wrapped the paper round his prize again, returned it to his locker and slowly shut the door upon it.

The sky over the deserted school grounds began to darken with clouds blowing up from the west. They covered the setting sun, first narrowing the orange glowing light to a few sharp beams that struck slanting across the grass, then blotting these out with a grey pall hanging low and threatening above the trees.

Mr. Hill stopped his restless pacing of the paths across the grounds and looked up and round. It was going to rain; fit ending to a day of gloom, anxiety and irritation. It would be advisable to go in. Mr. Hill resumed his restless pacing. He had no desire to return to the Masters' House. The Shakespeare Players Ltd. were still in possession, trying under the leadership of George Lemming to be as unobtrusive as possible. They had hardly spoken at dinner. It wasn't their fault, poor unlucky devils. Still, he had seen quite enough of them for one day—of Nigel Trent more than enough, far more than enough.

A large drop of rain fell on his head making his scalp twitch. Obstinately he turned up his collar and walked away from the Masters' House in the direction of the front door of the school. He would take refuge in the Common Room. There at any rate he would find peace until the shower was over. By the time he reached the drive the rain was falling freely in heavy mid-summer drops that splashed on the school steps and falling on the sun-warmed gravel gave back a cool fragrance.

As he stepped on to the drive he saw on the opposite side of it the cause of his disastrous mood sheltering in the porch of the Sanatorium. Ruth Fawcett had not taken an umbrella with her when she went over to see Matron, because at that time the sun was still shining. She was now debating with herself whether to run for it and get wet, or go back into the San until it was over. She was dismayed to see John Hill walking slowly and stubbornly through the deluge. "You'll get horribly wet!" she shouted anxiously.

Mr. Hill struggled with himself. The right thing to do after her behaviour that afternoon was to smile politely and continue on his way. But his lonely and disturbed heart rebelled. She had spoken in a friendly manner; to repel her now was to throw her more surely than ever into the apparently willing arms of that cad-faced young bounder of an actor. He walked swiftly across the drive and joined her in the San porch. She put her hand impulsively on his sleeve. "Oh, you're quite wet. Where have you been?"

If he had looked at her then he would have been very blind if he had not discovered in her eyes the appeasement of all his pain and the fulfilling of his best hopes. But because she was so close to him now and had been so inaccessible all that day, he dared not look at her at all, and only stared at the rain and said gruffly, "I'm all right."

She withdrew her hand quickly and they stood side by side, miserable and afraid to speak again. At last he broke the silence.

"It was lucky the rain kept off for the match. I thought it was too hot to last."

"Yes, wasn't it? I think it was the most exciting Fathers' match we've had since I've been here."

"It certainly was. But I shouldn't have thought you would have noticed it."

The bitter note in his voice stung her to anger. “What on earth do you mean?”

“You were pretty well occupied, weren’t you, entertaining our guests—or rather one of them?”

“Was I?” She drew herself up and looked at him coldly. “I thought we were supposed to entertain the guests on these occasions. Weren’t you doing the same, or were you just keeping a critical eye on me all the time?”

It was so exactly what he had been doing that he trembled with sudden fury.

“So you did it on purpose! You spent a whole afternoon flirting outrageously with a man you have only just met, and an actor at that. You are so sure of your attractions that you think you can play one off against the other, that you can— ”

He stopped, appalled at the words that were pouring from his lips, vulgar, horrible words, tumbling out, tripping one another up. He did not recognize his own voice. Nor did Ruth Fawcett. She shrank away from him. All the things that Nigel had said about their life here, the seclusion, the hard work, the constant strain of looking after children, the particularly bad effect it all had on schoolmasters and how one had to make allowances for them; all the things that, when Nigel said them, she had derided, knowing them to be untrue or exaggerated, now came crowding into her mind as she stared at the wild angry face of her beloved.

“I think you must be mad or drunk,” she said savagely, hoping to wound as she was herself wounded.

“I apologize,” said John Hill heavily. “I had no right to speak to you like that. I suppose I was thinking of the school, of what the parents might think of you— ”

Ruth checked his lamentable plunge into falsehood with an angry stamp of her foot.

“You would!” she cried. “The school—the school! Always the damned school! It’s the only thing you ever think of. I shall make friends as I please. Why shouldn’t I? You’ve always been rotten to me—rotten!”

She gave one angry tearing sob and running through the rain with her head down and the broad tail of her white nurse’s cap flying out behind her, disappeared into the school.

Mr. Hill dug his clenched fists into his pockets and strode back to the Masters’ House where he stood at the window of his room staring out at the rain which so treacherously had washed away his hopes. Ruth Fawcett ran rapidly upstairs, locked herself into her bedroom and flung herself upon her bed, crying bitterly.

Two other persons were sheltering from the shower, and their relationship also was fast approaching a state of distressed entanglement.

Nigel Trent, much against his inclination, felt compelled in the circumstances to obey Sonia's imperious summons. His kindness had as usual, and most unfortunately, betrayed him. But with all the selfish force of masculine youth he was determined to extricate himself at the earliest possible moment. His feelings, beyond those of natural pity for a good-looking woman tied to a jealous and bad-tempered husband, had never been involved. And now his interest was waning. The cause of Sonia's unhappiness had been removed, suddenly and painfully, it was true, but none the less permanently. And a new and interesting problem in the shape of Ruth Fawcett's pathetic little love affair with the dumb schoolmaster had appeared. Nigel saw himself travelling cynically through life, hampered by his beauty as an heiress by her wealth, debarred by it from finding a true soulmate, but ministering on the way to the happiness and enlightenment of others.

The rain, causing him to run the last few yards to the pavilion where Sonia had made her assignation, shattered his contemplation of this rôle, and sent him to her side in a very bad temper.

She flung herself into his arms with a tragic gesture. He kissed her mechanically, thinking that the shock had certainly aged her. He really must prevent her from making a worse fool of herself.

"Are you well enough to be out like this?" he inquired kindly.

"Didn't you want to see me?"

Nigel sighed. Women always would go to the heart of a personal matter. No polite skirmishing would ever control them. The raw centre must be exposed even if they were themselves the victims.

"I don't want you to get ill—and you've had a terrible shock."

"I know, but I had to see you. Nigel, I heard you and Bob quarrelling behind the dressing-room. When the policeman asked me about it I was so terrified about you I fainted."

"About me—why?"

"I thought for a moment that you might have— "

"*Me*?" Nigel was incredulous. "But why on earth should I want to hurt Bob?"

"He was jealous."

"He knew very well there was nothing to be jealous about."

"Nigel." She put her hands on his shoulders. "My darling, don't you love me at all?"

Oh God, groaned Nigel to himself, now we've got to go through it all over again. Why can't women enjoy a good time without wanting it to last for ever? Besides, this was a bit exaggerated. He hadn't encouraged her to that

extent. A few very mild kisses of her own seeking —after all she really didn't attract him much. He looked down at her. His very blue eyes were sulky, like those of a little boy told to greet strangers he dislikes on sight.

"Don't you love me at all?" she repeated.

"No," he said, and watched her warily, ready to counter the hysterics if they appeared.

But Sonia did not make a scene. She knew at the bottom of her heart that there was no hope for her, and she had her fair share of common sense. But her failure was bitter, and she dropped her face into her hands and wept.

Nigel was relieved to hear voices outside on the verandah. He went out to join the newcomers, closing the door carefully behind him. Sonia would have time to recover and would imagine he had gone out to ward off possible intrusion. It might be a good thing to prevent the visitors looking in through the windows and seeing her. At present they were bunched together at the corner by the steps.

"Hello!" said David Wintringham. "You caught in the rain too?"

"Yes," answered Nigel, glancing curiously at David's companion. This was Mr. Schofield, who nodded curtly and looked away at the falling rain, his hands in his pockets, and the collar of his coat turned up to his ears.

"I intended to walk home," said David ruefully, "having stayed so long. My wife has already taken the car. But there doesn't seem to be much chance of it at present."

"Oh, these summer showers don't last long as a rule."

They chatted amicably and pointlessly for a while, and Nigel began to wonder how he was going to break up the party and dispose of Sonia Fenton. The matter was taken out of his hands by the lady herself, with results that no-one present had anticipated.

Sonia's tears having died down, she decided to go back to the Cranstons' house and to bed. She could always explain that her walk had been interrupted by the rain and that she had taken refuge in the pavilion until it seemed hopeless to wait any longer. So she stepped out on to the verandah. David acknowledged her advent with grave politeness, Nigel with an uneasy smile. Mr. Schofield turned round.

"Oh, my God!" said Sonia blankly. "Colin!"

Into Mr. Schofield's face came a look of such deadly rage and hate that his audience was frozen with shocked surprise. Sonia recovered first; she took a hesitant step towards him.

"I'm sorry," she said in a quavering timid voice, "I didn't mean to… I have kept out of the way ever since I saw you in the hall yesterday. I couldn't help… I didn't know— "

"I won't speak to you," said Mr. Schofield in a low fierce voice. He put his

arm up before his face as if to blot out the sight of her, and still holding it in that position walked stiffly down the pavilion steps and across the cricket field to the school.

David watched the rain pouring on to his bent grey head and unheeding shoulders. He was beginning to understand a good deal that had baffled him hitherto. When he looked round again at Sonia Fenton he found her standing behind him alone.

"Where's Trent?" he asked, embarrassed by the look in her face.

"Gone too. But he was going, anyway."

David followed the direction of her hand. Young Trent was running back to the Masters' House. He took the threshold of it in an easy bound and disappeared. David glanced at Sonia Fenton; he knew what she meant, but after all, she must have asked for it.

"What did you and Mr. Schofield do to one another?" he said.

"He was my husband," answered Sonia quietly, "we were divorced seven years ago."

After the first heavy shower the rain fell steadily throughout the evening, making rivers at the edges of the paths and splashing down from the overflowing gutters on the roof. It soaked again the already sodden beds in the school garden, and filled with a shallow layer the bottom of the water-butt from which Bruce Pritchard had drawn his banned treasure.

But towards eleven o'clock the rain checked to a soft drizzle, and by midnight it had stopped, though the sky was still dark and the moon hidden by clouds.

Lionel Bassett looked at the luminous dial of his watch and decided that it must be now or never if he was to make good his escape. The camp bed which had been provided in place of the inadequate sofa of the night before creaked as he sat up and put back the blankets. But his companions did not move. George Lemming, also in a camp bed, and the two younger men, again on the Lilos, were sunk in a deep sleep. Bassett listened to their slow untroubled breathing as he stealthily collected his clothes into a bundle, pushed them into his suitcase and gathered up his shoes from the floor. He would dress in the solitude and security of the Masters' dining-room and let himself out through the window of that room. On such a dark night there should be a good chance of getting over the fence in a distant part of the school grounds. It could not be patrolled all round. He planned to walk north, away from Stanhurst, and take a train to London from a small station five miles off. In the metropolis he had friends who would help him until he knew what to do. Perhaps it was madness to bolt like this. He did not care. He could no longer endure the looks and hints of the whole cast, to which, since Mr. Warwick had been robbed, were added those of the masters. Life here was intolerable, at all costs he must get

away.

He slid his big legs over the side of the camp bed, and clutching his possessions in his arms stood up. No-one moved. He crept to the door, opened it with an unaccustomed skill born of his need, and went through. In the hall he breathed a great sigh of relief. The first step was safely taken, and the next need cause him no great anxiety. He could relax for a few minutes while he dressed and planned the second dangerous part of his escape. It was well for his peace of mind that he did not hear George Lemming roll over as the door opened, nor see him rise softly on his elbow to watch the gaunt figure pass out. He would have been more troubled still could he have seen George Lemming shrug his shoulders as he, too, consulted his watch before settling down again to sleep.

When he was dressed and had packed and gathered up his suitcase, Lionel Bassett climbed silently through the dining-room window and dropped down on to the soft grass beneath it. Everything was very wet outside. The ground squelched as he walked, and great drops fell startlingly from the trees and made him jump. He could not see a yard before him, and dared not use a torch, but he had taken note that afternoon of the general lay-out of the grounds, and by keeping on the grass close to the paths, which he could feel by their edge and the little step down to the gravel, he progressed slowly in the direction he had set himself to follow.

Except for the heavy falling drops that struck sometimes on his face or neck making him gasp and shudder there was no sound or movement about him. He felt alone in a dark wet world that stretched to a far-off imprisoning boundary. Beyond that boundary was freedom or at least the promise of it, but it seemed continually to recede before him, while the paths went forward, trim and unending, maddening in their neat purposeless continuity.

At last abruptly the path ended and grass spread out in front of him. His heart beat faster; he must be near the hedge and the boundary fence. He pressed forward holding out a hand and felt, as he expected, a wall of leaves in front. Now he was safe. Far away from human beings, asleep or awake, he could risk making a slight noise. He thrust his body into the hedge and forced his way through, feeling for the fence that should be close on the other side.

But there was no fence. As he groped bewildered the bright light of a powerful torch blazed in his face, sending him staggering back among the wet leaves, and a voice familiar in its form of speech said roughly, “Now then, what’s all this ’ere?”

The torch ran swiftly up and down the hedge. Lionel Bassett, looking about him in despair, saw that he had come out upon the back drive about six yards from the gate. The path he had so recently left opened demurely through the hedge a short distance to his right. Across the drive on the other side a similar hedge, for a similar distance, flanked the entrance.

He groaned inwardly and cursed his stupidity. In his anxiety to avoid

aimless wandering in the dark, and in his confidence in his own sense of direction, he had followed this path, and it had led him inevitably, as a good path should, from one place of importance to another. There was nothing to be done. As far as he was concerned the game was up.

"You'd better come along to the museum," said his captor sternly, gripping him by the arm and drawing his truncheon.

"Oh, I'll come," answered Bassett wearily.

Inspector Mitchell, dozing beneath a covering of rugs, was roused without difficulty. He regarded the prisoner with disfavour.

"I thought it'd be you," he said laconically.

Lionel Bassett made no answer.

"I shall arrest you for attempting to leave and for suspicious behaviour," Mitchell continued. "And I shall have you searched—now."

A few minutes later, under the skilled ministrations of two assistants, Bassett's possessions lay on the Inspector's table. Mitchell turned them over and glanced into the shabby leather note-case.

"How much money have you got in here?" he asked.

Bassett gulped. He was pale and shaking, and leaned on the table for support.

"I—I don't know, he whispered hoarsely.

"You must know roughly. You're not a millionaire. You came here at the end of the week. Had you any notes left then?"

"N-no. About seven shillings in silver."

"Very well. What is your salary?"

"Three pounds a week."

"Which you received last night in the middle of the performance."

The Inspector pulled the notes out of the case and put them on the table. There were four. He picked up one of them. "You have four notes in your case, and the number of this one corresponds to the second of the series lost by Mr. Warwick. Very fortunately he had got his from the bank on Friday morning—clean notes in series, of which he still has the first. As I said this is the next number to it. Now what have you got to say?"

"It's a plant!" screamed Bassett, suddenly losing control and beating his fists on the table. "I haven't taken anything. They all think it's me, they have done all the time, damn them… *damn them*! Just because they didn't like me! And they've told you, and now you believe it… I didn't take that note, I tell you. I didn't take anything, I swear to God I didn't. It's a plant! Can't you see it's a plant!"

"He'll go to Stanhurst," said Inspector Mitchell to the two constables. "Take him away."

SUNDAY

CHAPTER X

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Alastair Wintringham woke early on Sunday morning with a sense of accomplishment. He remembered the happy ending of the Fathers' match, and lay with eyes shut going over the last glorious moment of it. But soon his quick ears detected a scraping sound. He lifted his head from the pillow and looked round the dormitory. Five quiet forms were still sleeping soundly, but the sixth boy, Bonzo Taylor, was hanging out of bed introducing thistle tops, collected overnight, into the bedroom slippers of his next-door neighbour.

"Hi!" whispered Alastair fiercely. "What do you think you're doing?"

The culprit, his balance upset by surprise at finding the dormitory prefect awake, fell forward on his elbow. He struggled convulsively and managed with an effort to return himself to his bed. A few of the sleeping forms turned over grunting.

"Bring whatever it is over here," commanded Alastair.

Bonzo retrieved the thistle tops with some difficulty and crept over to the prefect's bed, beside which he deposited them sulkily.

"Go back to bed and *shut up*," said Alastair. "It isn't even reading time for another half-hour."

Peace again descended on the dormitory. Alastair turned on his other side and stared out of the window at the pale blue sky. It had been raining hard when he had gone to bed, but now the early morning summer sun was shining on the faint clouds. With any luck it would be another fine day. A picnic had been planned, originally to include Uncle David and Aunt Jill, but now those two would not be coming. He wondered how Uncle David was getting on. Had he decided yet which of the actors was the murderer? Alastair, in common with most of the school, had picked on Giles Dorbury as his first choice. He was older than the rest of the actors and of stocky build. He looked capable of delivering a blow with the requisite force. Also he had played the part of Antonio in *Twelfth Night*. His rough sea-captain's manner was impressed on the school memory.

Alastair's musings were disturbed by the fall of a heavy book to the floor. It was a very large copy of *Black Beauty* belonging to Coker Minimus, whose round scared eyes looked out over the top of the sheet. Alastair consulted his watch. At the same moment the eight o'clock bell rang. The youngest Coker, with a sigh of relief, picked up his heavy treasure and began to read.

Alastair opened his own book, but without much hope. The Sunday

morning half-hour of reading in bed had been a pleasure once, when no badge of office distinguished him from the common herd. Now it was his tiresome duty to quell the spirits of those whom literature did not delight, and who found the time beginning to hang heavily upon their refreshed minds and unoccupied hands.

"Shut up, Bonzo. Can't you read?"

"I don't want to read my book."

"Then why did you bring that one up? There are about fifty thousand other books in the Library you could have had. Shut up, you fool! It hurts."

"Bring that over here," said Alastair wearily. The garter, which had been wetted in the water jug and launched at his next-door neighbour's head, was brought across by Taylor and placed beside the thistle heads.

There were a few minutes' silence, soon broken by a loud bang from the other end of the dormitory.

"What *are* you doing?" asked Alastair, not looking up from his book.

"Why can't he read his own book? I don't want him reading mine. He reads too slowly and he won't let me turn over."

"If you lean over to the next bed like that you're bound to fall out," said Alastair coldly. "You *are* an idiot, Somers."

"He barged me."

"Serves you right for leaning over. He wants to read his own book."

"I say, Wintringham," said Bruce Pritchard in a low voice. His bed was next to that of the dormitory prefect. He had only just woken up, and with returning consciousness his problem had come rushing back into his head.

"I'm reading, or trying to," grumbled Alastair. "Oh, go on," he said, as Pritchard obediently remained silent.

"I don't know what I ought to do," said Bruce in a worried voice.

He described his experiment of the afternoon before and its successful conclusion. The dilemma was made plain.

"Gosh!" said Alastair, "I don't know what you'd better do."

"Could I tell your uncle, do you think?"

"You might. I tried to get hold of him yesterday, but Hermione couldn't make him come. She's rather a silly girl, really."

In low whispers they threshed out their problem in all its aspects, while Alastair continued to put down intermittent lunacies and Coker Minimus with the help of one small finger slowly followed the adventures of the black colt. When the bell rang for dressing it had been decided to approach Uncle David after chapel and confide Pritchard's secret in him then.

The pile of confiscated goods at Alastair's bedside, augmented by several pairs of braces, one or two hair brushes and quite a shower of garters, was

sorted out and redistributed to the owners. The dormitory then rose, washed, and climbed once more into its Eton suit.

The chapel bell was ringing when Mr. Schofield presented himself at the museum. He found Inspector Mitchell standing outside the door watching the parents arriving in the front drive.

"When I was a boy," said the Inspector, "I went to five different schools. My parents were always on the move, I don't know why. My father's work was in the City, so we moved about in the suburbs. They were all alike—houses and shops, some houses converted into two or three flats—all the districts we went to were as like as a handful of beans. But it meant five changes for me. I never got really settled, not like these youngsters here. It doesn't matter if their parents move house. It mattered to me—made me kind of restless. I expect that's why I went into the Force. My father was dead against it; my mother thought I was lowering myself. But I'd got the restless habit by then and I thought it would keep me on the move, always some excitement. Well, it's mostly routine of course, but it does keep you on the move, more than I bargained for, perhaps." He turned abruptly to Mr. Schofield. "You keep on the move too, I understand. Do you like it?"

"I loathe it." Mr. Schofield spoke with slow emphasis.

"I thought as much. But you like boys, don't you?"

"I used to think I did."

"Come inside. I want a word with you."

"So I imagined when I got your message."

Inspector Mitchell led the way in and the two men settled down at the Inspector's table.

"It has come to my knowledge," said Mitchell, "that you were formerly married to Mrs. Fenton. Both you and she have kept this information secret until yesterday evening when you met unexpectedly and gave the show away in front of Dr. Wintringham. It may have no bearing on this case whatever, but I want to know exactly what it amounts to. So I shall have to trouble you to tell me briefly the story of your marriage and why it was dissolved."

"This is damned impertinence!" cried Mr. Schofield furiously.

"You need not tell me about the divorce itself," continued the Inspector, taking no notice of the other's anger and consulting his papers. "I've got particulars here; they've just come in. You filed a petition a little over seven and a half years ago. Your case came on without much delay. You got a decree nisi and six months later it was made absolute. I have also a record of your wife's second marriage. She married Robert Fenton at a registry office six years ago last May, giving her maiden name."

"Then what can you possibly want to know?" asked Mr. Schofield

indignantly. “You seem to have dug out the whole miserable story in pretty quick time. You have the facts. They speak for themselves.”

“Not quite clearly enough, I’m afraid,” said the Inspector. “I do wish you would co-operate with me instead of trying to do the opposite. You only make me feel that you may have something to hide.”

“For instance?”

“What about your Indian clubs? Have you found the pair to the one in here?”

“No.” Mr. Schofield looked slightly subdued. “Are you suspecting me of having any part in this crime?”

“Of course I am,” answered Mitchell bluntly. Mr. Schofield sat up with a jerk. “Don’t misunderstand me. It’s my duty to suspect every one who was at or near the scene of the assault on Fenton at the time it was committed. You have admitted going out into the grounds for an indefinite period from the end of the second interval. You haven’t told me in detail where you went or what you did. You have lost a club that by the look of its fellow would be quite heavy enough to have caused the damage done to Fenton’s skull. You are obviously very upset by coming across your former wife here, first in the hall when she arrived, and then at the pavilion last night. I suppose you kept away from the play in order to avoid seeing her act. Now in face of all this is it surprising I should want to know a little more about your past history and hers?”

Mr. Schofield lowered his head into his hands; his face, when he spoke again, was hidden.

“She was the daughter of the Headmaster at the school where I taught. I went there when I was twenty-eight and she was just nineteen. When she was about twenty-one she got engaged to the son of some friends of her father’s. He was a few years older than she was, had a good job and shared her interests and activities, mainly games and sports of different kinds and amateur acting. They were both crazy about this. In fact I think it was taking the principal parts together so often that led to their engagement. Unfortunately his favourite sport was flying. He belonged to the local club and took a plane up whenever he could get the chance. He was killed three weeks before they were to have been married. It was an unsuitable day for flying, foggy I think. Anyway he was advised not to go up, but did so nevertheless.

“She was completely knocked out by the tragedy. Things had always been easy for her; it was the first time she had been deprived of anything she wanted. She was sent away to relatives in a different part of the country, and was very ill, I believe. When she came back at the end of eighteen months she was a different person. She looked well, in fact she had improved enormously in looks. She had always been pretty but had not paid much attention to her clothes and appearance. Now she dressed smartly, made up a good deal,

talked more, had more assurance and poise. We were shocked at first, and some of the other masters remained so. Her father was very sad about her and puzzled. He could not approach her because of her superficial cheerfulness, but I think he felt that something had gone very wrong with her. Her mother was a dull woman; as long as her child was well physically, she was satisfied. I felt as her father did. I knew that she had determined never to let herself be hurt again, never to let herself care deeply again for anybody or anything. And for two years I watched her hardening in this resolve.

"She went on playing games and acting with the amateur dramatic society. She made many friends, but her friendships did not seem to last very long. Her old friends, the people she had grown up with, had scattered by then. The boys were earning their livings, most of the girls were doing the same or had married.

"She and I had always been friends. I think she regarded me as so much older than herself, though there were only nine years between us, that she could talk to me in a way she could not do to her contemporaries.

One day— "

Mr. Schofield suddenly broke off his story. He glared fiercely at Inspector Mitchell.

"I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he said, "it has no possible bearing on anything."

"I think it has," said the Inspector quietly. "But you can skip the next bit. She was unhappy and she let you know it. You had always been fond of her, so you asked her to marry you and she accepted."

"Yes," answered Mr. Schofield harshly. "That was what happened. A common enough, sordid enough, ordinary enough story. You've met it thousands of times. It's always cropping up in the miserable crimes you work on. Young disappointed woman marries infatuated man older than herself. Result—sooner or later disaster, with or without crime attached. Do you think I haven't thought of this, all through the slow wretched years?"

"How long had you been married?"

"Only two years. It was a failure, naturally, from the start. Her father was pleased, though. He saw me taking over the school after he retired. At first I let myself share that happy dream. I was keen on the work, I had grown very fond of the school in the six years I had been there. But I realized pretty soon that there would be no future for me there."

"Go on," said Inspector Mitchell when the silence threatened to continue. Mr. Schofield lifted his head wearily.

"That's about all," he said. "She went on with her acting and her games. I couldn't act, wasn't very keen on the theatre anyway. I played golf and tennis indifferently, and was seldom free to join her except at the week-ends. The amateur dramatic society to which she belonged got more ambitious. They

began to import a professional producer from time to time and later one or two professional actors to ginger up the cast. This gave Sonia the greatest thrill she had at that time. She would talk of nothing but her wretched acting every time I saw her. I grew sick of it, and let her know I was. I knew she had only married me for the companionship of someone she had known before her tragedy, someone who went a little deeper into her life than her new smart silly friends. But all the same I had a right to expect companionship from her, some sort of return, however meagre.

"We quarrelled of course, and she confided in her new theatrical friend, a professional who often came down to take parts. His name was Robert Fenton. I don't know if he told her to break loose, or if she asked him to help her. But one day she went to the last performance of one of their shows and never came back. She wired the same evening from London, and wrote me a long letter the next day."

"So you divorced her?"

"Yes, later, when she said she wanted to marry the man. I did not take any steps until she asked me to. I foolishly imagined that she might get tired of her position and come back to me. Naturally she did not. She had sufficient talent to become a professional actress of a third-rate sort and I understand that she married her actor friend after the divorce. I did not see her again from the day she left my house until Friday evening when I came upon her standing in the school doorway with the others."

"That must have been as great a shock to you as it was to her."

"Possibly."

"What did you decide to do?" The Inspector's voice was stern.

"Nothing. What was there to do? I determined to keep out of her way, not to go into the Hall during the performance, and to say nothing about her to anyone. I expected her to leave again the same evening."

"Yet you went out into the grounds at the end of the second interval."

"I told you. I wanted some air. Besides, I had left my car out. I wanted to put it away."

"Ah." The Inspector turned over the pages of his note-book and found an entry. "Would that be a blue Morris Ten?"

"Yes."

"It was parked just off the back drive here on the far side of the potting shed?"

"Yes. I generally leave it there. How do you know?"

"It's our job to make inquiries. It was said to be yours. Why didn't you mention before that you had been round this side of the school?"

"I didn't think it relevant."

"I'm the best judge of that. Tell me what you did when you went to the

car. Which way did you approach it?"

"Through the Headmaster's garden. The performance was going on then, I could hear it, so I decided not to drive past the hall making a noise, but to go out into the road and come in again by the front drive. The garage I use is on the other side of the front drive, behind the bushes near the gate."

"Right. I suppose you don't know exactly what time that was?" ,

"I do not. Sometime after the second interval."

"When you got out your car did you see anyone at all in the back drive or going into the museum?"

"No. At least, Billy Oldfield was near my car. He is— "

Inspector Mitchell leaned forward.

"I know about Billy. Are you quite sure you did not go to the museum yourself—to find that club of yours, for instance?"

"I did not go to the museum." Mr. Schofield's voice was firm and his eyes met the Inspector's steadily.

"Ah well." Mitchell snapped the band round his notebook. "I needn't trouble you any further just now, Mr. Schofield. But if anything else comes to your mind that you've forgotten temporarily, you'll always find me here, see?"

Chapel had just ended when Mr. Schofield went out of the museum into the sunshine. He avoided the issuing crowd of parents by going through the stage door into the school Hall. From thence he escaped to the deserted Common Room.

The parents stood about the front drive in groups waiting for the boys, who had gone up to the dormitories to change out of their Eton suits into clothes more appropriate for a day in the country. Jill, with a subdued, solemn-faced, and very clean Nicholas by her side, was talking to Mrs. Coker.

"What a very nice sermon Mr. Cranston preached," said the latter, waving to Coker Minimus, who was looking at her out of the window of one of the nearer dormitories, and making no progress with his dressing. "I wish my youngest would bestir himself. The others are always quick and then they are so angry with him, poor child, for keeping us waiting."

"I expect it is because he is thorough," said Jill. "Nicky is rather like that. Yes, I liked the sermon. But then I am very fond of Mr. Cranston. David says he is a perfect example of the beauties and limitations of the unscientific mind."

Mrs. Coker looked slightly shocked.

"Talking of beauties," she said in a low voice. "Did you see that young actor in chapel? He caused quite a sensation."

"I couldn't look at anything else," answered Jill. She did not add that the service for her had receded into the background before the purely aesthetic delight she had taken in watching him. He had been sitting with George Lemming in the back row on the opposite side to herself, with his fair head shining against the cool grey stone of the chapel wall. While he sang the hymns with evident pleasure and familiarity his face was lifted to the windows in front of him. He looked like a young seraph. Jill was reminded of the companion of Finaun and Caeltia— Art—who was young and beautiful and "had the music." Nigel's clear baritone had risen with George Lemming's tenor to enrich the treble of the school choir and knit together the varied murmurings of the parents. Yes, certainly Nigel had the music.

"They've got no further, I suppose?" said Mrs. Coker, "I *am* sorry for Mrs. Redesdale."

Her boys surrounded her with a rush and bore her off. Jill found herself standing beside Professor Pritchard.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Wintringham. Has your husband deserted you, or is his research too urgent to allow him to come to chapel?"

"Research," answered Jill promptly. "But not his official research; a sort of side line."

"I wonder he has time," said the Professor mildly. "I forgot to tell him yesterday that I was particularly interested in that last paper of his. You might say that to him some time if you remember. I'd like to ask him— "

Bruce Pritchard and Alastair Wintringham came suddenly from behind a large parent and stopped abruptly.

"There you are!" said the Professor. "Now we can get going."

"Oh bother!" said Alastair. "Where's Uncle David?"

"I don't know," answered Jill. "Do you want him?"

"I did rather. It's Bruce really. Oh, I don't know. Where's Mummy?"

"Talking to another mother—look, over there! I don't know who she is."

"Mrs. Taylor. Oh heavens, I wish Uncle David was here."

He whispered in rapid undertones to Bruce Pritchard. The latter nodded gravely.

"There's some conspiracy going on," said the Professor to Jill, "I hardly saw Bruce at all yesterday."

"Make him tell you at lunch," suggested Jill.

The Professor sighed. Bruce seldom told him anything. Perhaps it was because he had no mother, poor boy, and only one brother, very much older than himself. Like many other professors, Mr. Pritchard was not good at any subject except his own, which was bio-chemistry. He therefore sentimentalized what was largely a question of heredity. Though in his own youth he had possessed the full complement of parents and had besides

several brothers and sisters, he had been a reticent and silent child, absorbed in making the observations which interested him and indifferent to the rest of his surroundings.

Jill saw her brother-in-law beckon to Alastair. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"I shall see David at lunch," she said, "I am going back now with Nicholas, and then we are both coming over here early in the afternoon. Can I give him a message?"

"Will he be here at roll-call to-night?" asked Alastair.

"I expect he could be."

"I'll look for him then. You might tell him Pritchard wants to speak to him specially. But he won't be back till roll-call. His father was taking him to see his brother, he said."

"Come on, Alastair!" cried Hugh Wintringham. "Morning, Jill! David working? Must fly, I'm afraid. Margaret is getting restive. Come on, old man. You do dawdle!"

Mrs. Flinders-Crawford took off her hat as the big car slid down the drive. Mark sat beside her at the back; her husband was in front with the chauffeur.

"Tuppy!" she said, poking him in the shoulder. "Did you see that extraordinary young man again? He was at the match yesterday?"

"Which young man?"

"You must have noticed him. Everyone in chapel was gaping at him. He really is quite indecently good-looking. Most unsuitable taking that face into church, I thought. But what I was going to say was this. I was trying to think who he could be all through the service and now I've remembered who he reminds me of."

"Oh, who?"

"Surely you must have noticed it yourself. That actor who did the Duke in *Twelfth Night*, on Friday. It couldn't be the same, could it? I mean—why?"

"Can't say, darling. I'm afraid I don't quite get who you mean."

"Oh, Tuppy, you are hopeless!"

Mark looked solemnly at his mother.

"I told you who he was yesterday afternoon, Mummy. I said he was the actor. Don't you remember?"

Mrs. Flinders-Crawford remembered.

"You were talking a lot of nonsense yesterday afternoon. It's time you stopped saying the first thing that comes into your head. All this gangster stuff, murders and nonsense of that sort. You won't know the difference between what's real and what isn't, if you go on."

Mark said nothing. He had for some time now given up trying to get into

communication with his mother, but he liked looking at her and she smelled nice. As he turned back to the window on his own side he caught his father's eye. It was looking at him with lively interest, and conveyed unmistakably a secret amused warning. For the first time in their lives Mark and his father met on common ground.

CHAPTER XI

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When David and Jill went back to Denbury after lunch they found the Redesdales attempting, with little success, to take a brief period of rest. Outward disturbances had for the time being ceased, and both were sitting down with books in their hands. But the nervous start they gave when the Wintringhams entered the room betrayed their inner restlessness and dread. They put down their books and smiled wanly at the visitors.

"Oh, you poor dears!" said Jill. "Is it as bad as that? Judy, you simply must rest. You look like a piece of chewed string. Why not go and lie down? Charles, make her!"

"It would be worse to lie upstairs thinking," said Judith rebelliously. "I'm all right."

"No, you're not. David, she isn't, is she? If you won't go upstairs, put your feet up here and rest properly. We won't talk."

"I'd very much rather you did," said Judith, giving in to Jill's insistence, and arranging herself comfortably with cushions behind her back. "It's the uncertainty that is so perfectly hellish. Charles doesn't know whether to tell the parents officially or not. Some of them know already, and have tried to ask me about it."

"Mrs. Coker knows," said Jill. "But she will be all right. She spoke very nicely indeed about you, Judy."

"Oh yes, the Cokers are splendid people. But all the parents aren't like that, worst luck."

"You see," said Charles Redesdale with a worried frown on his face. "As long as suspicion was confined to the Shakespeare Players I did not feel that the school was directly involved. But this new story about Schofield alters everything. If suspicion really rests on him the school is most decidedly implicated. After all I engaged him as a temporary master, so I am responsible for bringing him here, though I am certainly not responsible for his past."

"They would probably think you were," said Judith gloomily. "When people begin to grouse there's no stopping them."

"In any case," went on Mr. Redesdale, "Schofield is in direct contact with the boys as long as he is working here as a master. However amenable the parents are, I cannot blame them if they object to their boys being taught by a potential murderer."

"One would see their point," murmured David.

"On the other hand I can't send him away at the moment, because Inspector Mitchell would not allow it."

"Who told you about Mr. Schofield?" asked Jill.

"Oh, he came to me himself, after his interview this morning with Mitchell. He was very decent about the whole thing. I quite like him, you know," said Mr. Redesdale, running his hand through his hair in exasperation, "which makes it so very much more difficult."

"Mind a pipe, Judith?" asked David, fishing in his pocket.

"Of course not."

David completed his preparations and felt for his matches.

"Got a light, Charles?"

Mr. Redesdale, his own pipe half-filled, with strings of tobacco trailing from it like a fern from its basket, got up and searched the mantelpiece.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

"Can't you find any matches?" said Judith, beginning to remove her legs to the floor.

"Matches? Oh yes, here you are, David. No, I've just remembered." He sat down, and with maddening deliberation completed the filling of his pipe and lit it.

"Charles, don't be so infuriating," said Jill. "What have you just remembered?"

"Who I showed those medals to."

His three listeners sat up with a jerk. Charles took one or two puffs and then removed the pipe from his mouth.

"It was that prospective parent who came in on Friday morning. Mrs. Balham—Burton—no, what was her name, Judith?"

"Burpham. Oh, Charles, what an anti-climax! Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure. She noticed those miniatures of Hermione and Brenda first, and then I showed her the medals. We took them over to the window to look at the inscriptions."

"Did you put them back in their cases afterwards?" David asked.

"Well, you know, I can't remember if I did. I laid them on the writing desk while I made a few final notes about Mrs. Bur— "

"Burpham."

"Queer name that. So many of the parents have curious names. I never can think why. Well, anyway, the medals were on Judith's desk when I was speaking to her."

"Then I'm pretty sure you left them there," said Judith.

"And one of the actors must have taken them as we've thought all along."

"I don't know," David interrupted. "When I was in here with them I remember the desk was closed. The thief would hardly think of exploring it, though he might take the opportunity of Mrs. Fenton's faint to pick them up off the mantelpiece."

"There you are," said Mr. Redesdale complacently, "I must have put them back. That proves it."

"On the contrary, knowing you," said Judith, "I should say it didn't prove anything."

"It must prove something."

"No, not *prove*."

"Shut up, you two," said Jill firmly. "David, do you really think it's Lionel Bassett who took all those things?"

"Of course, they've arrested him. I'd forgotten for the moment." Judith sighed.

"No, frankly I don't," answered David. "I think the person responsible is a great deal more quick-witted and quick-fingered than Sir Andrew Aguecheek Bassett. And I don't think Mitchell really suspects him of it either, in spite of his arrest and Warwick's pound note being found on him. You see they haven't found any of the other notes, or any of Gash's money or Charles' medals, among his things. He hasn't been outside the school grounds since it happened, so unless he's hidden them out of doors or in a remote part of the school buildings I don't see how he can be the man."

"What about an accomplice?"

"Oh yes, that's possible, and applies equally well to any one of the cast of course. Only we haven't seen any mysterious strangers hanging about."

"Even if it was Bassett who stole the various things, must it necessarily be he who did in Robert Fenton?"

"No. We have no definite connection between the murder and the thefts. What Joan Carson heard is suggestive, but not at all explicit."

"Then the thefts might have been one person and the murder another."

"Quite possibly. Only, as in medicine, it is improbable to find two separate causes responsible for facts which, linked together, can be accounted for by a single cause."

"But it is just possible?" Judith insisted.

"Given a sufficient motive," David conceded.

"Would you call Mr. Schofield's past a sufficient motive?"

David caught Jill's eye and smiled at her.

"It ought not to be so. But that is a question the murderer is accustomed to answer by his own unpleasant actions. I mean if murder is done the murderer at any rate considers his motive adequate, whatever other people's views may

be. You read of similar cases from time to time, so we can't rule him out on the score that we wouldn't do it ourselves."

"I do hope," said Jill passionately, "that it isn't poor Mr. Schofield."

George Lemming decided to employ the empty hours of Sunday afternoon rehearsing an altered version of *Twelfth Night*. If, as seemed possible, Lionel Bassett was charged with the murder of Fenton, the release of the rest of the company would not be delayed long. Lemming preferred not to rely on the manager's promise to find understudies, but determined to get some sort of show prepared for performance at short notice. To this end he cut several scenes, promoted Giles Dorbury to the part of Sir Toby and Sydney Bond to that of Sir Andrew. The morning had been spent in re-learning parts. After lunch, with the permission of Mr. Redesdale, and the endorsement of Inspector Mitchell, the company took possession of the school Hall and began their rehearsal.

"Will Sonia act?" asked Hilary, when they were gathered below the stage.

All eyes turned to George.

"She damned well ought to," he answered. "She seems to have done her fair share of mischief without letting us down as well."

"We can't manage without three girls," said Nigel firmly. "You obviously can't cut out Viola or Olivia, and if you cut Maria the whole Malvolio plot goes down."

"Fabian might arrange the plotting. But it would make a pretty good mess of the thing."

"Sonia will have to act," repeated Hilary Stocton. "You could make her, couldn't you, Nigel?"

"Why?"

Hilary looked at his calm unembarrassed face and to her great annoyance blushed herself.

"I'll read Olivia if you like, George," she said hurriedly to cover her confusion.

"All right; but for heaven's sake let's get a move on. We don't want to be all night over this."

The rehearsal was soon well away, and with the absence of the Fentons an unaccustomed peace was felt, a lightening of the tension that had been inevitable previously on such occasions. Nevertheless the afternoon was very hot, and when the first break was called all the cast declared themselves exhausted. The men flung off their coats and rolled up their sleeves. Joan and Hilary watched them. They themselves were hot and sweating, in spite of the fact that they wore thin frocks.

"How you can endure coats at all this weather— " began Hilary.

"We can't," answered Nigel. "We put them on as a concession to the school sabbath. Ask George. He said I wasn't to wear sandals in church, in case they shocked the parents. I think he exaggerated. After all I don't varnish my toe-nails."

"Cad!" said Joan, wriggling her plump scarlet-tipped feet. "But you're right about Auntie, George. He banned my slacks for the same reason." She appealed for support to Edward Gash. "Surely the parents wouldn't mind a girl in slacks. They must have seen them before."

"Before is not the trouble," answered Gash without a smile, "it's the behind they usually take exception to. And you're no sylph, Joan darling, are you?"

"And you're no gentleman!" Joan rushed at him in mock fury, and he put up his arms to defend himself. She caught his left hand and held it, pushing his rolled shirt sleeve still further up his arm. "Edward, what *have* you done to yourself? You've got the most colossal bruise on the back of your arm. Doesn't it hurt? How on earth did you do it?"

"I banged it on a desk in the museum, when I was seeing Mitchell."

Edward Gash spoke stiffly, drawing away from Joan, and pulling down his sleeve to cover the deep purple mark above his elbow.

"He's had it since Friday night," said Nigel Trent carelessly.

Gash turned on him fiercely.

"No, I have not! Saturday afternoon, when I saw Mitchell."

"All right, old cock. Keep your shirt on. But remember that our present doss-house is not of such generous proportions that I should be likely, nestling beside you on my Lilo, to overlook a magnificent bruise like that."

George Lemming said thoughtfully, "Some of those cases in the museum have very sharp edges. Shall we get on with the next scene? We can't have the Hall after five."

Joan and Hilary stood together waiting for their cues. They both saw that Gash was very pale, and that he spoke his lines with an effort.

"I wonder how he hurt his arm really," whispered Joan.

"On Friday night, Nigel said."

"Exactly."

"Hadn't you better tell your charming doctor? It would be a grand chance to make another date with him."

"I think I will. But he isn't my charming doctor. He's in love with his wife, bless him."

"Oh, yeah?"

Inspector Mitchell spent the first part of Sunday afternoon directing in

person the efforts of his men to find the instrument that had caused Robert Fenton's injury. But even his lively mind and personal supervision were unproductive of results. A number of possible objects were unearthed, but were discarded after examination. Yet the Inspector was convinced that the weapon could not have travelled very far from the School buildings. Assuming for the moment that the guilty person was a member of the company, and apart from Mr. Schofield he had discovered no other suspects, there had not been sufficient time to transport it to any great distance. Those members of the cast who had both motive and opportunity had had only very brief periods of time when they had been unobserved by one or other of their colleagues. True, Edward Gash had disappeared into the night shortly after the discovery of the injured actor, and had remained unseen for about three quarters of an hour. There would have been time during that interval to go some distance along the road outside the school and to get rid of the weapon in a local pond or copse. But was it likely that a man dressed in the stage costume of Malvolio and carrying something heavy in his hand, would venture on to the public highway? It was dark at the time of the discovery. Cars coming along the road would have had their lights on and could not have failed to see something strange in his appearance. Surely no-one who had shown the coolness of this murderer, the steady nerve that had taken him through his performance to the last curtain-call, would lose his head to the extent of running such an obvious risk?

So Inspector Mitchell worked away throughout the hot quiet afternoon, and did not go back to his headquarters in the museum until word was brought to him that tea was served there and Dr. Wintringham would like a word with him if he was not too busy. He welcomed the first part of the news and felt a certain curiosity about the second. His medical friend had behaved up to date in a model manner. He had assisted the Inspector's thoughts without putting forward any fantastic suggestion of his own. But from past experience Mitchell knew that the moment when David seemed to be dropping quietly out of a case was just the time to expect some startling discovery by him. On two occasions at least he had revolutionized a case when it appeared to be nearing its end. However, in the present instance, the case seemed to be as motionless as the leaves on the trees in the school grounds, so Inspector Mitchell hastened his steps towards his temporary office.

"Can I pour you out some tea?" said David when the Inspector appeared, looking very dusty and somewhat jaded.

"You certainly can." Mitchell dropped into a chair, accepted the proffered cup and helped himself to two lumps of sugar.

"Any progress?" asked David.

"Nope. Any brain-waves?"

"Sorry. No material for them has come my way. Only a curious little piece of what is probably pure cattery."

"Do you mind translating?"

"Poor old boy! You *are* in a bad way. Have a cold bath or something. Charles would be delighted to offer you facilities. Anything in fact to speed the good work."

"I bet he would. Go on, though."

"Fat little Joan says Edward Gash has ever such a nasty bruise on his arm above the left elbow. She saw it at rehearsal this afternoon when he lifted his arm. And he seemed really upset when she passed a remark to him about it. Those were her words."

"They sound like it. Do you think it has any significance, this bruise? When did he get it?"

"Ah. That's just it. He says Saturday, but Trent says he saw it on Friday night. That was what upset Gash at rehearsal. We've discussed Gash's motive, or rather the lack of it, before. Have you found anyone who saw him outside after the second interval up to his last appearance?"

"No."

"Can't he remember at what point in the play he re-entered the wings?"

"He says now it was just before Sir Toby and Sir Andrew go on with their heads bandaged."

"That's possible. He only had the short scene at the end to do. They cut the scene where he is shut up supposed to be mad."

The Inspector looked blank.

"Never mind. I'll take you to see it properly done one day."

"Not if I know it," growled Mitchell.

"I swear I will. Now did Gash stay in the wings after that?"

"He says yes."

"But no-one noticed him?"

"No."

"On the other hand Bassett says no-one came out while he was standing near the door, and that was the time Gash would have to have gone out to deliver the blow."

"Exactly."

"So what?"

The Inspector drained his cup and poured himself out some more tea.

"The answer is that we've exhausted that angle for the time being. I've been concentrating to-day on finding the weapon, but I haven't succeeded. I am beginning to think that it may have been taken outside the grounds. In which case only two of the suspects fit the requirements, the first being Gash again."

"Surely not—in his stage clothes!"

"I agree. But as we seem to lose him for the time of the murder he has got to be kept on the list."

"Who's the other?"

"Mr. Schofield." Inspector Mitchell described the master's account of his movements after the second interval.

"Hm," said David. "He could get quite a distance in a car."

"I know." Mitchell's voice was gloomy. "Also he has had six weeks to get acquainted with the locality. He would know the best place to get rid of incriminating evidence."

"That means extending your search to ponds, etc. in the neighbourhood. Are you going to start at once?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind. I keep wondering why Schofield came in here to find his Indian clubs, and only found one."

"Either he used the other one on Fenton, or he didn't. If he did and hid it outside the school, he wouldn't want the other solitary one to be noticed and inquiries made about a pair to it. He would know that such inquiries would lead straight back to himself, and might bear a sinister interpretation. If he did not use the missing club on Fenton, then he was probably just looking for the pair as he said he was. Or he might have heard that a heavy blunt instrument had been used and thought of his clubs and again wished to remove them in order to avoid suspicion."

"He was unlucky then," said Mitchell. "He ought to have been a bit more careful to come when I wasn't here."

"That suggests innocence to me, you know," answered David.

"But we haven't finished with the clubs. The missing one is still missing, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then its absence remains suggestive until it is found and proved not to have been used."

"That's right." The Inspector smiled approvingly. "You're getting more thorough. Not so much of the I've-had-an-inspiration about you this time, is there?"

"You forget that I am doing research of a kind," answered David. "It is a very sobering experience."

"Really? I always understood it was packed full of thrills."

"Not a bit of it. You ought to know better. Your own work is research; it is also popularly regarded as exciting. Is it packed full of thrills?"

"I should say not."

"There you are."

For a few minutes the two men reflected upon their drab existence. Then

David said, “About Bassett. What are you going to do with the poor devil?”

“He’ll come up before the magistrate to-morrow and get remanded for a week—in custody.”

“It’s a damned shame.”

“It’s the best and safest place for him. Everyone in the cast thinks he is the thief they have been suffering from. Well, he may be. In which case we have stopped him for the present and there won’t be any more thefts on his charge sheet. But suppose he isn’t the thief. Then if we get any more stealing we shall have pretty good grounds for thinking someone else was responsible for all the previous thefts. And don’t forget that the best motive for this crime up to date is fear at being discovered by Fenton in the act of stealing—-probably Lemming’s: pay envelope, possibly Gash’s as well.”

“Of course. I’d forgotten Lemming’s envelope. You don’t think Fenton could have taken it himself? No, with these later thefts that would be fantastic. I was just thinking he could have taken Charles’ medals when he was talking to him in the sitting-room just after the cast arrived. He could have taken everything really except Warwick’s notes. And Bassett might have pinched those to give him a little extra capital for his escape.”

Taking one, and hiding four somewhere he could come back and fetch them later?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Besides, if Fenton was the thief, who killed him and why?”

“Perhaps one of those robbed, which would be Gash or Lemming. Gash says he was in the wings but no-one saw him; Lemming admits being out, though he says he was in the front drive.”

“I don’t care for this Fenton idea,” said the Inspector firmly. “I was afraid your imagination would get the upper hand before long. Fenton was dead when Mr. Redesdale’s medals were missed. Mr. Redesdale is convinced he put them back in their case after showing them to a parent. Fenton was dead when Mr. Warwick’s money was taken. I don’t like this idea of two thieves. You said yourself—one patient, one disease.”

“Up to a point, yes. But there are exceptions.”

“Which prove the rule,” said the Inspector tritely.

“Must you?” David groaned.

It had been decided by Mr. Redesdale that those boys who had not been taken out by their parents or by the parents of their friends, should be kept out of mischief by a good country walk. It fell to the lot of the unfortunate Mr. Hill to conduct this walk, which did nothing to mitigate the acute depression from which he was now suffering. He had seen in the visit of the two actors to chapel not the polite gesture intended by George Lemming, whose idea it had

been, but an evil design on the part of the younger man further to entangle the affections of his lost love. He had noticed with impotent rage her frequent glances in Nigel's direction throughout the service. Also he resented the intrusion of two trained male voices where he and Mr. Lawes had hitherto taken the lead. It certainly had improved the general effect; honesty compelled him to acknowledge a musical success. But his temper was in no way improved by the admission. As he walked alone at the end of the straggling procession of boys he left behind him a sad trail of withering bracken tops savagely decapitated by his walking stick.

Presently the winding path across the heath led to a small disused gravel-pit. Mr. Hill called a halt. He had to keep the boys out till tea-time, but it was supposed to be a holiday, after all, and the sun was too hot for walking indefinitely.

"You can sit down and rest," he said.

The boys flopped into the shade of bushes or lay flat in the heather. Mr. Hill followed their example, lying with his hands behind his head watching the flies hover on invisible wings above the bracken or float lazily past to disappear where the air and heathland quivered into one misty warmth.

A muffled voice said, "Sir, can we play forts?"

"Yes, if you have sufficient energy."

His charges scattered, their voices growing faint as they arranged their bases and worked out their complicated system of attack and defence. Before long Mr. Hill raised himself on one elbow to watch. His anger had passed; he felt mildly sorry for himself; but he knew that that too would pass, leaving only an unassailable loneliness to be endured, most probably, for ever.

When the procession finally wound its erratic way home again across the common, Mr. Hill was surrounded by a chattering congratulatory crowd. His personally prepared fort, though added to the game at a late stage, had withstood the concerted attack of its two neighbours and a brilliant sortie on his part had led to the subsequent defeat of one of them.

The boys dispersed outside the school and Mr. Hill went towards the Masters' House. He saw Ruth Fawcett crossing the grass near the school. The deck-chair she had just left stood with a rug beneath it and a large work-basket at its side under a tree. On the rug sprawled the graceful figure of Nigel Trent. He was making a daisy-chain.

John Hill ground his teeth. This was too much. A belligerent feeling, released perhaps by his participation in the sham battle on the heath, suddenly flooded his whole being. The young bounder must not enjoy a walk-over; he was damned if he would let him.

Mr. Hill entered the Masters' House whistling a spirited marching song. Mr. Warwick cocked an inquiring eyebrow in his direction. Had poor old John at last pulled it off with Miss Fawcett, or had he decided to cut his losses and

quit? Mr. Warwick scribbled a few tentative odds on the margin of his writing-pad, and crossed them out again.

CHAPTER XII

As the hot afternoon dragged slowly on towards evening Denbury School fell into a pleasant stupor. The energies of the boys had been effectively dissipated by their walk with Mr. Hill. The staff were enjoying the brief lull in organized activity. The searchers in the grounds had mysteriously withdrawn, and even in the neighbourhood of the museum all was peace. Only the lorry belonging to Shakespeare Players Ltd., standing forlorn and deserted between the boot-room and the museum door, served to remind passers-by in the drive that a state of emergency still existed.

But at six o'clock the first of the returning cars crunched to a standstill on the gravel and disgorged a boy quiet and replete as a nestling whose wants the parent birds have supplied with over-zealous care. Others followed in quick succession, until the drive was full of turning and backing cars, parents dodging the more incompetent manœuvres with nimble politeness, and boys nursing in their arms fresh stores of the unsuitable foodstuffs so discouraged by authority. Some of the parents who had far to go left again immediately. Others were waiting until after roll-call, and a very few intended to stay until after evening chapel, when the half-term holiday came to its official end.

Alastair Wintringham and his parents arrived about five minutes before roll-call, and made their way to the school Hall where it was held. Bruce Pritchard did not seem to have come back; at all events he had not been seen by any of Alastair's other friends who had returned. Nor was Uncle David apparent. But it was still early and Alastair trusted his Aunt Jill. If she had promised that Uncle David would see him, then the interview would take place if it were humanly possible.

The Wintringhams walked slowly round the hall, pausing occasionally to look at the gymnastic apparatus that adorned its walls and hung festooned from its ceiling.

"You're lucky to have this as a gym," said Hugh Wintringham. "At my private school we had a poky little place and no decent apparatus."

His family made no answer. They had heard this many times before, and no answer was required or expected. Conversation lapsed; Alastair's limited range of it had been exhausted many hours before. They came round full circle to the door, just as Mr. Warwick appeared with the school list. The Wintringhams retired into the passage while the boys answered to their names.

Presently Alastair came back accompanied by Bruce Pritchard whom he

had met in the crowd. To his great relief he saw that his uncle and aunt had arrived and were talking to his parents. David caught his eye and nodded. Alastair whispered to Bruce. "Thank goodness Aunt Jill has told him. Now you'll be able to tell him."

But David was involved in a long discussion with his brother, and seemed to be unable to bring it to an end. The two boys fidgeted and scuffled with their feet. Jill saw their impatience, and realizing that David could not suddenly carry off Alastair without the probability of his parents following him, decided to intervene.

"Mother has sent you some flowers, Margaret," she said, "I brought them up in the car. I think David had better put them in your car now, or they may be forgotten. Take Alastair with you, David, then he can show you where the car is parked."

"Oh, thank you most awfully," said Margaret. "But hadn't Hugh better go?"

"No, let David. I'm sure he'd like to. Wouldn't you, darling."

David smiled at her gratefully; so did Alastair. Bruce looked solemnly from one to the other and followed them at a little distance. When they had transferred the flowers obediently from one car to the other David said, "I understand you want to tell me something."

Alastair hesitated.

"Well, I do. But we aren't really supposed to talk about it now."

"Never mind. I'm not the school authorities. Go ahead and say anything you like."

Alastair described how Hermione had brought him the news of the accident and how the school had organized its own part in the investigation, ignoring his advice to avoid the police, with the disappointing result that all further research was forbidden.

"And quite right too," said David firmly.

"But you see, Bruce hadn't taken his weapon to the Inspector and now he can't, and he swears it's the right one."

"*What?*"

"Bruce Pritchard. He found an old Indian club in the water-butt near the potting shed and— "

"Good God!" said David helplessly. He stared at his nephew in awe. "Take me to Pritchard."

"He's here," answered Alastair proudly. His news had had the effect he wanted. He wafted his friend forward with the air of an impresario revealing unknown talent. "Tell him," he ordered.

"You see, sir, I bagged the back drive from the museum down to the back gate."

"You what?"

"We divided up the grounds between us," explained Alastair. "He bagged the back drive because he had the idea of looking and wanted that bit."

"I see. Go on."

"There wasn't anything on the ground anywhere," continued Pritchard. "I looked in the potting shed and the gardeners' tool shed opposite, but there wasn't anything there either. The only other good place anyone could have hidden anything in was the water-butt at the side of the potting shed. So I drew off the water— "

"Why did you do that?"

"Well, I thought it would be a waste of time fishing about in the water if there wasn't anything there. It's all dark, the water, you can't ever see the bottom. And I might have thought there wasn't anything there because I couldn't feel it when there really was. And I thought if I drew off all the water I could see the bottom, and the policeman in the back drive wouldn't stop me if I was just watering."

"Good," said David. "Very good. Go on."

"Well, it was at the bottom. I had to get some steps and lean right over. I nearly fell in myself," said Bruce Pritchard. Alastair giggled.

"Didn't anyone notice you at that stage?"

"Oh yes. The policeman in the back drive asked me what I was doing. I said I was trying to get a club out that had fallen in, so he held the steps, because they were wobbling when I leaned right over. I don't think he noticed me running off the water because the water-butt is round the side of the potting shed. But he saw me on the steps because I had to put them in the drive; it isn't level enough the other side."

"Wonderful," said David. He looked at the earnest countenance of Bruce Pritchard and saw the same calm intelligent eyes that had gazed at him from the Professor's face the afternoon before.

"And what exactly is the trouble now? Won't Inspector Mitchell take your find seriously?"

"We can't show it to him!" cried Alastair. "That's just the bothering part of it. Mr. Redesdale made a rule that nothing was to be taken to him. They came into the dining-room at tea yesterday."

"I hadn't time to go before tea," said Pritchard gloomily. "It took an awful time using up all that water."

David laughed heartily.

"I bet it did. Never mind. Show it to me, and if it is any good, I'll fix you up with the Inspector."

Two delighted boys led David to the locker room. There were a few other boys there, but they took no notice. They were used to parents being shown

the contents of lockers.

"Here," said Bruce shyly. He was suddenly doubtful, where before he had been confident. Suppose it wasn't any good after all? But David's prompt reaction immediately allayed his fears.

"Christ!" he breathed, forgetting the presence of the boys. "It's the pair to Schofield's!"

The Indian club was identical in size, shape, and colour with the one he had seen in the museum. He wiped the head of it clean. On the side a few inches from the top was a small deep scratch.

With reverence and care David wrapped the old piece of brown paper round the club and handed it to Bruce.

"I congratulate you," he said gravely. "I shall now take you to the museum and leave you with Inspector Mitchell. He will make it all right with Mr. Redesdale. After all you found it before the new law was passed. You understand, don't you—both of you?"—he included the triumphant Alastair in his glance—"that you must not say one single word about this club to anyone inside the school or out of it?"

The boys nodded and fell in on either side of him, stunned by the stupendous success that had attended their efforts.

When David had delivered Bruce Pritchard and his find into the safe keeping of Inspector Mitchell, and returned Alastair to his questing parents, he decided that the one man who could offer him any help at this critical stage in his research was Mr. Cranston. Accordingly he walked down to the cottage where he found him very comfortably enjoying the evening sunshine of his garden in company with his sister and Mr. Lawes, who had dropped in for a pipe before chapel.

David was welcomed and provided with a chair.

"I may as well be frank, and confess at once that I want to talk to you about this case, Cranston."

"Indoors?" asked Mr. Cranston patiently.

David looked round at the others.

Lawes said, "If you are going to tell me all that I already know about Schofield's misfortunes, I will tell you at once that the others know too. You see that young actor saw no occasion for reticence, so it was all over the Masters' House a few minutes after Schofield's encounter with his former wife."

"I wonder how any of you manage to have a private life at all," said David.

"I don't suppose we do," answered Mr. Cranston. "But in the ordinary way we only talk about one another to privileged persons who have our entire confidence, so that the gossip goes along intersecting tunnels, so to speak,

instead of being cast, as this was, to the four winds. In that way, I think the subjects of rumours perhaps never meet the things about themselves."

"In other words," said David, "well-bred people never gossip. Still, as you all know about Mrs. Fenton and Schoneld there won't be any harm in my talking about them. I suppose the lady herself is not likely to appear."

"No," answered Miss Cranston. "She went away a short time ago with Mr. Lemming. He wanted to discuss their plans with her."

"Do you think Schofield is really hard hit by her turning up here? That is what I want to discover," said David.

"It depends what you mean by hard hit, I think," answered Cranston. "He was evidently startled by seeing her in the hall when they arrived. And then he was definitely upset by my stupid remark on the front steps— about his being a deserter, you know."

"Oh yes, Mitchell told me," said David. "It was tactless, of course, as she had deserted him, but you weren't to know that, after all."

"I don't see that Schofield need have been terribly jealous of Fenton," put in Mr. Lawes, breaking the silence that had fallen on the group. "Mrs. Fenton showed her indifference to the poor chap in no uncertain manner. Warwick saw her round the corner of the museum in the first interval necking with young handsome."

"You use very painful expressions," said Mr. Cranston wincing. "But I suppose you don't know any better."

"She pretended to be overcome with grief," added Miss Cranston indignantly. "But I saw her watching at the window five minutes after I'd left her prostrate in her bed, too weak to lift a finger from the sheet."

"And yet she was supposed to be crazy about acting, and Fenton was by far the best of the bunch. Don't you agree?"

"Certainly. I thought the whole production very irregular. That man Lemming, for instance. He is a very indifferent actor but his management of the lighting during the last scenes was most effective. Again, the attempts at scenery were bad, the costumes good. The acting was very uneven. Actually I thought Gash's performance the best, but Fenton was good," Mr. Lawes spoke with enthusiasm. "He wasn't afraid to act. I expect all the younger ones fancy themselves as modern actors—can't move hand or foot or even their mouths for fear of what they call 'ham'. Personally I'd rather have ham than junket any day. And Fenton never overdid it, either. Even that drunk scene at the end. I remember saying to Hill I thought he did it very well, naturalistic without being vulgar. Hill thought his other acting florid by comparison. I thought he had probably been asked to tone it down."

"Very possibly." David was anxious to bring the conversation back to Schofield. But before he could do so, the chapel bell began to ring. Mr. Cranston and Mr. Lawes stood up.

"Coming, Emily?"

"I must put my hat on. You two go ahead. Dr. Wintringham will wait for me, I know."

When she had gone in David resumed his seat, wondering for what purpose he had been delayed. He was not long in doubt. Miss Cranston returned, complete with hat and bag, and carrying in her hand a piece of paper which she handed to David. It was a play-bill announcing the Shakespeare Players Ltd.

"I found it in a pocket of Henry's dinner jacket," said Miss Cranston, "I always go through his pockets to collect the handkerchiefs. I don't think they would ever get to the wash from the less-used clothes unless I did. I knew what it was because I put it in the Masters' Common Room myself."

David looked at the paper again. Across the photographed faces of Robert and Sonia Fenton parallel lines in red ink had been scored with reckless heavy-handedness.

"Bad for the nib," he murmured.

"Or a bad nib," suggested Miss Cranston.

"Which do you really think?" David asked.

Miss Cranston shivered.

"Couldn't it have been used as rough paper to try the nib on?" she complained. "Henry may have been trying a nib himself. I haven't asked him yet. I don't *want* to think it was done on purpose. That would be horrible—savage!"

"It was a savage crime."

"Oh, I know. But surely—surely, no civilized person would— "

"My dear Miss Cranston," said David bitterly. "You have had ample opportunity in the last few years of knowing just what civilized people can do if they let themselves go. And Schofield admits that Sonia Fenton ruined his life. Why did you give me this paper—privately so that your brother and Lawes should not see it—unless you share the thought that is in my mind?"

Miss Cranston only shook her head and hurried on towards the chapel.

The cottage where Billy Oldfield lived with his parents and younger brothers and sisters stood at the end of Denbury village street, tucked away in a recess between the general store and the butcher. Beyond the butcher's shop the cottages spread thinly surrounded by their gardens, and came to an end altogether in a line of petrol pumps marking the corner of the main road.

David stopped his car at these pumps, and having with some difficulty secured the services of the elderly man on duty there, took in two unnecessary gallons of petrol and verified the position of the Oldfields' cottage. He left the

car at the side of the filling station and went forward on foot.

He found Billy Oldfield enjoying the warm summer evening leaning over the gate of his home making faces at the passers-by. He was a tall lad for his age, with a body that should have been capable of swift, beautiful co-ordinated movement. It was sad to see his big useful hands jerking uncertainly on the top of the gate. Even his intended rudeness had not the competence and precision a normal child of five would have put into the act. It was clumsy and spasmodic too.

"You're Billy Oldfield, aren't you?" said David, coming to a stop in front of him.

"Yessir. Me mother's out."

Whether this was a gratuitous piece of news or an explanation of his present behaviour David did not determine. At any rate the boy spoke fluently though indistinctly, and seemed to know what he was talking about.

"You work up at Denbury School, don't you?"

"Sometimes I 'elps Fred."

"That's what I mean. Do you remember being up there last Friday."

"Do I remember?" The boy's face went sullen and he rocked himself to and fro on the gate. "That were day the acting chaps come. I warn't doin' no 'arm. 'E told me off proper, the— "

"Never mind." David hastened to stem the tide of obloquy. "I heard they hadn't been very nice to you. Tell me, did you go away at once when they spoke to you, or did you stay around for a bit?"

A cunning look came into Billy's eyes.

"What do you want to know so much for? I haven't never set eyes on you afore. The other chap didn't 'alf want to know a lot too."

"That's all right. I just want to find out why they treated you so roughly."

"It were only the old 'un. But 'e didn't get the better of me for all that. No fear. I went round corner of potting shed where I'd been most of the time, and I took a peek at 'em when they all come out. Then I went 'ome."

He flung back his head and gave a roar of hearty laughter. One or two of the passers-by turned to stare.

"Go on," said David hurriedly. "Can you remember any more about them?"

"Beautiful cloes they 'ad on," said Billy dreamily. "There was one young lady looked a treat. I mentioned 'er to Mr. Schofield when 'e was drivin' orf in 'is car."

"Did you?" David suppressed his rising excitement.

"But 'e didn't take no notice. 'E told me to go 'ome."

"Did you?"

"No fear. I goed up into vegetable garden for a bit, then I come back. Mr. Schofield warn't 'alf in a 'urry-like."

"Was he?"

"Oh yes." Billy nodded his head several times. " 'E banged the door of 'is car and 'e turned 'er out on the drive all of a bounce, and 'e tore orf through the gate like 'e 'ad to catch a train. Nearly ran into t'other car, 'e did."

"Was the other driver annoyed?"

"There warn't no other driver. Car standing in the road, I mean."

"Oh, I see, a stationary car. So he was in such a hurry he nearly ran into it, did he?"

"That's right."

"Well, well." David paused, and then said casually: "You didn't happen to notice if Mr. Schofield came out of the museum to go to his car, did you?"

"I didn't see 'im at all before 'e got to it. I told you I was 'id be'ind potting-shed. Them actin' chaps was all inside by then, I reckon."

"I see. So that's all you know, is it, Billy?"

" 'Ere, what is all this? Asking me questions!"

"Don't worry." David pulled out some silver and selected a shilling. "Get yourself some sweets, Billy. And don't go on minding about the actors being nasty to you. It isn't likely to happen again."

"I'll see to that," said Billy grandly, pocketing his tip.

Ruth Fawcett waited in some trepidation beneath the chestnut tree at the corner of the Headmaster's garden. Her conversation that afternoon with Nigel Trent, having reached a point at which she had determined to put her case to him in all its perplexity, had been rudely interrupted by the arrival of the school walk. She had fled indoors in a panic, while Nigel from the rug watched the clouds gathering on John Hill's returning face and drew the correct inferences from the behaviour of both lovers. He felt that intervention, too long delayed, had now become essential. So he waylaid the under-matron as she came out from evening service and proposed a meeting when her more urgent duties were fulfilled. Ruth was busy and anxious to be rid of him; she promised to be under the chestnut tree after the boys were in bed. So at half-past nine she stood in the appointed place, nervous and angry, telling herself that in two minutes more she would go in, and that men were utterly incredible and impossible.

But Nigel was not late on purpose. Together with the other members of the company he had gathered about George Lemming while the latter phoned their manager in Eastbourne. It had taken a considerable time to get through. The hotel had answered and had been cut off before Mr. Dewhurst's room had been gathered into the circuit. A wrong number followed. Later the hotel

emerged again, querulous and confused, and this time Mr. Dewhurst was out. Still later on the hotel number was found to be engaged. After half-an-hour of intermittent effort George made contact with his chief and informed him of current events, notably the arrest of Lionel Bassett. Dewhurst expressed concern, but it was apparent that he now hoped the case would come to a speedy conclusion and the players be released within the next twenty-four hours.

"He's going to fix us up two more men by Tuesday," reported Lemming. "To meet us at Newbury. We are to go there to-morrow if we can, rehearse Tuesday, play Wednesday, and continue our programme as scheduled. He says Sonia must carry on after this week and no nonsense or quit. She'll have to go to the inquest to-morrow, of course. Dr. Mason won't be able to get her off that, I shouldn't think. And then there will be the funeral. We shan't get any more sense out of her till that's over."

"Aren't you a bit callous?" asked Nigel with distaste.

"No, I'm not. I was a friend of Bob's. And he was good; better than the whole bunch of you put together. Most of you can't act, and ninety per cent, can't even work. Except for Edward there isn't one of you will ever be anything more than you are now. Bob was a real actor; he deserved a little respect."

Nigel shrugged his shoulders and looked at his watch. He was late for his appointment, all through taking Sonia's part, the bitch—as if she was worth it! He ran lightly towards the chestnut tree and saw that he had been forestalled.

John Hill, taking an evening stroll, had seen the white cap and apron gleaming in the dusk. His heart beat at suffocating speed. She was alone; now was his chance to make amends—to wipe the slate clean and start afresh. He had barely reached her side when Nigel bounded up, breathless from his run.

"Oh!" said Mr. Hill, seeing his dreams again shattered by this infuriating young man. "It's you, is it? You seem to haunt Miss Fawcett at present. She is giving you a course in Home Nursing, perhaps?"

Ruth's cry of dismay cut him to the heart. He went on savagely, "I hope she finds you an apt pupil."

Miss Fawcett drew her little navy blue nurse's cloak round her and with head up and scarlet cheeks walked away across the grass. Nigel leaned wearily against the tree.

"You know I think you must be balmy," he said wonderingly. "Don't you realize the girl is nuts about you? Worse if anything than you are about her. Yet you two go scrapping all over the place like a pair of cats, and all your fault."

"Get out!" said John Hill.

"Of all the uncivil blokes I've ever met you take the prize."

"*Get out*!"

“Ungrateful too—wet and dumb. God, how du— ”

“To hell with you!” shouted Mr. Hill lashing out in sudden fury. Nigel side-stepped and the fist intended for his nose glanced off the tree with agonizing results.

“Lucky you didn’t hit it straight on. You might have broken your arm. I saw that done once in a pub. Chap missed his man and hit a pillar. Smashed his wrist to blazes.”

John Hill’s anger had evaporated. If what this ghastly youth said of Ruth was true there might be a chance for him even now. He glanced down at his bleeding knuckles and up at the distant figure of his beloved marching blindly away from him across the football field. Without a word he wrapped his handkerchief round his hand and set off after her.

“Go to it, moron!” breathed Nigel Trent, starting lazily on his return journey.

Ruth heard footsteps behind her, but did not turn because tears were running down her face. Mr. Hill laid his bandaged hand on her shoulder.

“Ruth, please forgive me. I didn’t know what I was saying. Please don’t go on walking away from me— please don’t!”

She stood still, looking down. He turned her face up with his uninjured hand and whispered, “Oh, my darling—don’t!”

When they had both recovered a little he asked her to marry him. Ruth laid her face sideways against his coat. “I don’t know, John. I think you would be a very difficult and uncomfortable sort of husband. But I suppose I’ll have to because I do love you terribly—terribly, I do.”

As he took her again into his arms her crumpled nurse’s cap slipped off and fluttered down on to the grass.

CHAPTER XIII

Inspector Mitchell stared gloomily at the playbill streaked with red ink that lay before him on his table. “You must agree it’s a damned suggestive piece of evidence,” said David Wintringham.

The Inspector grunted.

“I know we decided Schofield’s motive was not adequate,” David continued. “But we also pointed out that no motive ever is to the sane outsider. Here you have a man who married comparatively late in life. He was in love with his wife, but she was not in love with him and he knew it. That gave him an initial grievance. Their life together was unhappy, as it was bound to be, and it ended, as he himself had expected it to end, in disaster. His anticipation of her wish to leave him did not lessen the bitterness of the blow when it came, and it seems to have destroyed completely both his peace of mind and his confidence in his own abilities. I grant you he would not have been able to continue teaching at the school where her father was headmaster. But there was no reason why he should not have settled somewhere else, and remained there. He must have been good at his job or his father-in-law would not have welcomed him so cordially as a possible successor. But you see what happened to him. For seven years he has wandered about taking temporary posts, on his own admission never staying at any school for more than a couple of terms. He does not seem to have developed any personal contacts in the course of his wanderings; he never seems to have been passed on from one school to another through friends, only through agencies. In other words he shows that he has ceased to take any interest in his profession except as a means of livelihood. And yet he told you himself that he had been fond of his work and of boys and their development.”

“All right,” said Mitchell, “I grant you he was hard hit. He isn’t the first, either.”

“No, but with him I do think it went deeper than with most. A lot of men divorce their wives but they don’t let it ruin their whole career. After a brief period of hell they write the lady off, forget her, console themselves, and feel generally all-round efficient. They don’t develop an inferiority complex like Schofield—not most of them.”

“Perhaps so. But even the mopers don’t usually go about looking for revenge.”

“No, I know. On the other hand the opportunity for revenge does not generally come their way. I don’t suppose Schofield has been meditating

murder all these years. But I do think that when he saw that playbill in the Common Room, and saw his wife's face looking up at him next door to that of the man who had taken her away from him, I do think that at that moment he would have liked to feel his hands round Fenton's throat, choking the life out of him. And I think that partly in anger, partly in disgust at his own feelings and partly in a desire to obliterate the pair of them from his mind, he took up the red ink pen and scored those lines across their faces. Having done that he had introduced into his mind the idea of elimination. It was possible, given an opportunity, for that idea to develop into physical action."

"I see what you mean," said Inspector Mitchell. "It's an interesting theory, if a bit long-winded. But go on."

"The next step in the development of the motive, which, you must remember, had really lain dormant for seven years, took place on the school steps at the end of the second interval. Cranston was the innocent means of charging up Schofield's resentment emotionally to bursting point. He asked him if he was a deserter too. That made Schofield see red. He was so absorbed in his own unhappiness that he failed entirely to understand that Cranston was only referring to his absence from the play. Or possibly he did understand it and resented the implications that he was at fault in not going to see the performance of the two people who had wronged him. In either case the word deserter was unfortunate. In Schofield's mind it applied to his former wife, and to her alone. To have himself linked, however indirectly and fantastically, with what to him was her crime, roused him to a state of fury. Cranston has said how shocked he was by the man's appearance, how he seemed to be scarcely sane when he pushed down the steps into the garden. Cranston is not given to exaggeration; he is one of the most courageously truthful people I know, and by that I do *not* mean tactlessly truthful, he can be silent in the best tradition. So if he says that he was shocked we can take it there was adequate foundation for his reaction."

"All right," said the Inspector, "Schofield is in the garden raging like a wild beast. What next?"

"I don't know," said David. "I don't know what he did until he got into his car in haste, not paying much attention to anything about him. Billy Oldfield will tell you he slammed the door of the car, backed it clumsily on to the drive, and drove out of the back gate at a dangerous speed, paying so little attention to what he was doing that he nearly crashed a stationary car in the road. You may say that this was just a continuation of the angry mood in which he had gone out into the garden. But there is another explanation, or rather two."

"Let's have them."

"He may have decided to take revenge either on Sonia or on Robert Fenton. That may be far-fetched, but I say that in the state of mind he appears to have been is it was quite possible. He had reached the point where the

broodings and repressions of seven years had boiled over; he was not quite sane. But I think there is another explanation too. I think he left the school front steps and Cranston with thoughts of violence in his mind, and as he let his imagination play with the idea of attacking his enemies he thought first of where he was likely to find them—the museum, turned dressing-room—and then with a flash of memory of his pair of Indian clubs which. he had left there after showing them to the school sergeant. And then I think his imagination may have recoiled from the picture he had begun to build up in his mind. Thinking of the clubs brought a picture of actual violence before him, and being by training and inclination a fundamentally peaceful individual his better self revolted and he began to calm down. But the thought of his clubs persisted. He wanted them back; he had never intended to leave them in the museum. In his emotional switch-over he went to the opposite extreme, and told himself he did not give a damn if he ran into Sonia herself or her bloody husband. He went to the museum in a mood of bravado, and there he found Robert Fenton alone. Fenton said 'So it's you, is it?' That was what Joan Carson heard, and she heard no reply. Why? Because Schofield's anger had come back, and was choking him. Fenton had got in the first word, and had spoken angrily and a bit contemptuously, Joan thought. Anyway, she said it sounded like the beginning of another row. Schofield's blood was up now. Fenton must have gone back to the stage almost at once to take his next call. I think Schofield stayed in the museum, found his Indian club and waited for the actor to come back. When Fenton came in again alone after his drunk scene with Bassett, Schofield went for him with the club and laid him out. Then he immediately left the museum, got into his car, and drove off in the state of agitation described by Billy Oldfield."

Inspector Mitchell sighed deeply.

"You ought to be a journalist or a politician," he said. "The way you make a plausible story and lose the facts that don't suit you. I wonder that sort of thing doesn't hamper you in your research."

"Why, what's wrong with my theory?"

"In the first place," said Mitchell, "Schofield was genuinely surprised, according to Mr. Warwick, to hear of Fenton's death. Pleased about it, but surprised. Then secondly, the Indian club turned up in the water-butt. Billy Oldfield never said he saw Schofield drop it in, yet Billy was standing just near the water-butt when Schofield got into his car."

"Hell!" said David. "Never mind. Billy is a halfwit, he may not have remembered. Or Schofield may have taken the club with him in the car and put it in the water-butt later."

"Maybe," said Mitchell. "But I was very much impressed by something that boy Pritchard said when he brought me in the club. He's a remarkable boy, that—father's a professor, I understand. I asked him why he took so much trouble over the water-butt, and he said, 'There wasn't anything in

either of the two sheds, and the water-butt *was the only other place for hiding anything on the piece I bagged*.' I thought the same myself. Unfortunately the local men weren't as thorough as they should have been. They stirred up the mud but they didn't empty the butt like Pritchard, and they reported nothing doing there. But there's another snag in your theory—knocks it out altogether, I'm afraid."

"What's that?"

"Fenton warned Billy Oldfield off. He was very angry. The boy said ' 'E told me off proper, like 'e'd 'ad a drop or two.' That describes Fenton's temper rather well, according to the others. He sometimes gave them the impression he'd been drinking. But this happened to Billy just before Fenton went on the stage for the last time. The boy described the bandage round his head; he was evidently all set for his last scene. And that happened *after* Billy had seen Schofield drive away in, his car."

After a long pause David spoke again in a plaintive voice.

"Damn you, Mitchell," he said. "It all fitted so nicely. Now you've disposed of Schofield for the time of the crime, who have you got left?"

"Well, actually," replied the Inspector, "according to their own stories there was no one at all in the museum at the time of the crime—except, of course, Fenton himself."

"That's very helpful—that's brilliant!" cried David, "according to their own—which of them is lying, that's the point?"

"Gash, Bassett, or Lemming."

"Yes, we did all this before. Motive, the thefts. Action, Fenton finds the thief at his work and accosts him—'So it's you, is it?' Thief grins sheepishly, and says nothing, but bides his time and strikes Fenton down some minutes later. Mitchell, that's *nonsense*. If the thief wanted to shut Fenton's mouth, would he have waited till after the man could have laid information against him? And why, if it was the thief he found, did Fenton *not* give information? He could easily have told George Lemming as they left the stage together. But if it was Schofield he saw in the museum, he would naturally say nothing about it. It must have been Schofield."

"It couldn't have been Schofield."

"You let the word of a mental defective destroy a theory that fits all the facts."

"It doesn't fit all the facts. The thefts have got their place in this crime, I'm convinced of that. And Billy would never have invented his description of Fenton. How could he imagine the bandage and his appearance of being drunk?"

"Wait!" said David. "Drunk! What did Lawes say about his acting in that

last scene?—It was realistic—not like his other acting.—By God!" he cried, "Why did I never think of that?"

"Go on," said Inspector Mitchell. "Let's have the worst. I can bear it."

"This is where I am vindicated. *The blow was struck immediately following the words, 'So it's you, is it*?' Fenton fell, but recovered consciousness almost at once, or perhaps his assailant helped him, frightened at what he had done. You remember the skull was fractured, but it was not an extensive fracture. Death was due to compression, from haemorrhage on the surface of the brain. There are cases, quite well-known, in which this compression is delayed. The victim gets up after the accident and goes home; later he sinks into a deep sleep followed by coma and death. That is why you police and people who have done their first-aid course insist, quite rightly, on hospital treatment for all cases of head injury however slight. Fenton was suffering from the effects of the blow when he cursed Billy Oldfield; he was suffering from the effects of the blow when he went on the stage and played Sir Toby's last scene with brilliant unintentional realism. He had probably forgotten who had hit him, forgotten he had been struck. But he didn't forget his part; he knew it as a drunkard knows his way home. Afterwards he went back to the museum, and sank into the coma in which he was found. There did not have to be anyone in the museum then. The blow was struck *before* he made his last appearance on the stage. And Schofield could have struck it."

"Ah," said Inspector Mitchell. He began to look through his note-book and make marks against certain entries. "You're dead sure of this medical stuff?"

"I say that it could have happened like that."

"Can we get further confirmation from the post-mortem findings?"

"No. They fit the diagnosis of compression. They can't prove whether it was delayed or not."

"Billy Oldfield went off into the vegetable garden after Schofield drove away," said Mitchell. "Pity he didn't stop in the drive. I'd like to know who came out of the museum about then, before Billy wandered back that way and was cursed by Fenton."

"Nobody did," said David firmly. "Schofield is our man."

"I don't know so much about that," answered Inspector Mitchell, calling for his sergeant.

Sonia Fenton, supported by Mr. Cranston, who had guided her through the grounds with his pocket torch, sat at one side of Inspector Mitchell's table, Mr. Schofield and David Wintringham at the other. The electric lights of the museum, shaded by flat opaque glass discs like inverted dinner plates, shone with a hard light upon them, accentuating the deep lines of Mr. Schofield's face and the dark shadows under the eyes of his former wife. The schoolmaster admitted having made the lines in red ink on the play-bill, but

refused to explain his action. Inspector Mitchell next lifted the covering that lay over Bruce Pritchard's find, watching Schofield's face as he did so. The latter showed no emotion, but espressed a calm surprise.

"My other club. Where did you find it?"

Mitchell ignored the question.

"Are you sure it is yours? Don't touch it, but you can have a good look from where you are."

"Yes, that is my club. At least, it looks very much like it. It is very dirty, which it wasn't when I last saw it. But apart from that it looks exactly the same as mine. Where did you find it?"

"I am glad you identify it," said the Inspector. "Will you kindly look closely at the top of it. Yes, come nearer. You need not turn it. You will see what I mean on the part uppermost."

Schofield bent over the club while Inspector Mitchell watched him carefully. But his behaviour remained normal and his attitude one of bored indifference.

"I don't think that deep scratch was there before. Is that what you mean?"

"It was the scratch I was alluding to—yes. How did it come there?" Mitchell's voice was peremptory.

"I haven't the least idea. I have just told you I never saw it before. How did it come there?"

"Don't you know?"

Mr. Schofield returned to his seat and sat down firmly. "I suppose you are trying to hint, most clumsily, that my club was used in this unfortunate affair. It may well have been, since I left it in the museum over Friday night. But I do not know how it comes to be in its present condition, nor anything about the scratch."

"Inspector!" said Sonia faintly. He turned in her direction.

"Please tell me before you ask any more questions. Was that the weapon used?"

"Yes, Mrs. Fenton."

"How have you proved it?" Schofield asked the question scornfully, but he did not look at Sonia Fenton, who had covered her face with her hands.

"Because the scratch I asked you to look at was made by the club coming in contact with the safety-pin on the outside of Fenton's stage bandage. The shape and size correspond, and the tiny piece of varnished wood found embedded in the head of the safety-pin is the same as that of which the club is made. The colour of the varnish is the same. In fact, ever since you drew my attention to the pair by coming here for them we have been on the look-out for this club."

The Inspector did not add that he had blamed himself severely for not

including among the searchers the man on duty in the back drive. If he had taken him into his confidence young Pritchard would not have got away with his find so easily.

"I see," answered Schofield. "Where did you find this club, then?"

"Now, Mr. Schofield," said the Inspector slowly, "you have asked me that question three times. You seem very anxious to have me tell you the answer. Are you quite sure you could not give it me yourself?"

"I could not. It is a sheer waste of your time continuing to ask me these questions. I had nothing to do with the death of this man. How could I have?"

"I can tell you that," said Inspector Mitchell grimly.

With his eyes still on Schofield's face he outlined David's theory, laying particular stress on Billy Oldfield's observations, and Joan Carson's eavesdropping. When he had finished Mr. Schofield sat up in his chair. He looked distinctly relieved.

"If you accept Billy's statements as being sufficiently reliable to build your case on, why did he omit to tell you that I had thrown the club into the water-butt? You say he was hanging round there near the potting-shed at the place where I had parked my car. Would he be likely to forget a thing like that? Or would he be likely to miss seeing or hearing me do it? It must have made a splash of a sort. At any rate he would have heard my footsteps coming and probably looked in my direction. Even if he had not been looking do you think I would have been fool enough to risk attracting his attention by dropping the club into the water under his very nose?"

Mr. Schofield paused for breath and Inspector Mitchell began to make his favourite pattern of dots in a corner of his blotting paper.

"But there is a much stronger objection than that to your theory—an objection which knocks it flat, I am glad to say."

"Let's have it."

"You suppose me to have been in the museum alone when Robert Fenton came in. Those words of his were spoken to me, were they? Well, that was absolutely impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I never even met the man!"

"Bless my soul!" said Inspector Mitchell. "You don't say so!" He looked triumphantly across at David.

"But surely!" the latter cried in some indignation. "You must have seen him some time or other. Do you mean to say you never brought your wife home from rehearsals, never went to her shows, never went to any parties they had after their shows—never at all?"

"Never," said Mr. Schofield coldly.

David shrugged his shoulders. The man had certainly asked for what he

had got.

"But you must have at least seen him in court?" said the Inspector.

"I saw him give evidence. He did not, to my knowledge, single me out on that occasion. He was not in court when I gave evidence. I never met him to speak to, and I doubt if he knew what I looked like."

"Do you confirm this, Mrs. Fenton?" the Inspector asked.

"Yes." Sonia spoke with an effort. "They never met. At first I should have liked to ask Bob to our house, before—well, before we became fond of one another. But Colin always made excuses. He disliked my friends —always —"

"Is there any need for this interview to go on?" asked Schofield hoarsely.

"No," said Inspector Mitchell. "No, I don't think there is."

"Back to the thefts," said David morosely, when the museum was again clear of visitors.

"I thought we should be," replied the Inspector cheerfully. "Don't be downhearted. If you hadn't tumbled to that alteration of the time factor we might be still in the soup. As it is I'm beginning to see daylight."

"Putting your head up out of the soup to watch the dawn, I suppose," said David bitterly.

"That's the ticket. Now, joking apart, can you prove your theory of this delayed compression—prove it medically, I mean?"

"No, I don't think I can. I can't say more than that it was physically possible for Fenton to have recovered from the blow sufficiently to act his scene."

"Then we'd better see what the other suspects were doing at the earlier time. I didn't do it before because I wanted to undeceive you about Schofield."

"Did you know he had never met Fenton? It was a bit heartless to drag him into Sonia's detested presence if you did."

"I did not know—but I guessed it might be so. Also I thought it would do him good to see her in a new perspective. Tone down that picture of her girlish beauty he had been treasuring for the last seven years, poor mutt."

"Quite the little psychotherapist, aren't you?"

Inspector Mitchell took up a pencil and a piece of paper.

"Bassett," he said, "seems to have been in the wings; said he put on the stage bandage there and waited for his next call. We may get confirmation of that, or we may not. Trent was on the stage, so that lets him out definitely. Most of the rest of the cast were on the stage too. Miss Carson heard the famous words spoken in the museum and then she went on the stage.

Lemming— ”

The Inspector consulted a chart that had been prepared for him from the acting version of the play in use by the Shakespeare Players Ltd. It showed the exits and entrances of all the members of the cast with the approximate times of their occurrence.

“Yes,” he continued, “Lemming was off when it happened—not for long, I admit, but still, just about long enough. He also has stated that he was in the wings at the time. Actually he made his reappearance with Fenton, a short time after Bassett’s entrance.”

“Yes,” said David thoughtfully. “You would have imagined Lemming might have noticed that Fenton was not quite normal.”

“If he had he would not have mentioned it,” answered Mitchell, “Lemming doesn’t open his mouth more often than he has to. I shall put it to him of course. But I notice that he has not volunteered one single scrap of information in this case. His statements are all the result of direct questions.”

“M—m. That leaves us with Edward Gash—who has a nasty bruise on the arm and gets upset if attention is drawn to it. The girls say he is always nervy but, as Hilary explained, nothing to what he has been since Fenton croaked. The alteration in the time doesn’t make any difference in his case, does it? He was outside just the same?”

“Outside and unable to remember exactly when he came in.”

“You will probably think this far-fetched,” said David, “but shall I tell you what occurs to me? I think Gash was speaking the truth when he said he was outside. But I think in the course of his wanderings he went to the museum, opened the door and found Fenton lying unconscious. He did not know what had happened, but he went to help him and found him just recovering consciousness. He probably helped him up and then Fenton, dazed as he must have been, may have taken him for the assailant and attacked him causing that bruise. We know that as he left the museum Fenton cursed Billy Oldfield for hanging about. Gash stayed away from the stage as long as he could to avoid seeing Fenton again. The rows he had had with him had become a nightmare. It is all pure theory, of course,” finished David modestly, “but it would explain Gash’s intense excitement later when Fenton died, also his curious nervousness since. He would not dare to describe his experience for fear of being disbelieved and having the murder pinned on to him.”

“Quite so,” said Inspector Mitchell drily. “Your story is very pretty, almost as pretty as your yarn about Schofield. But a simpler one would be that Gash socked Fenton himself. However, we will see what he has to say for himself and how he says it.”

As he rose to his feet the door opened and Mr. Cranston appeared apologetically on the doorstep.

“I hope I am not interrupting your work,” he said. “But I happened to be

talking to Redesdale just now and he told me about the loss of his medals. I am afraid I don't pick up news very readily. My sister always says I am quite ignorant of what is going on in the school outside the form-room. So it was the first I had heard of his loss. And it occurred to me that as there seems to be some uncertainty about the movements of the medals, because Redesdale showed them to a parent in the morning and then put them back— "

"Did he though?" said David. "You know what Charles is."

"I can't say as to that," went on Mr. Cranston. "All I *can* say is that they were missing during the parents' refreshments after the play, because Brenda noticed it and drew my attention to it."

"Will you say that again?" said Inspector Mitchell heavily.

Mr. Cranston repeated his statement.

"Thank you, sir," said Mitchell with great respect. "I shouldn't wonder if you haven't been the means of bringing a criminal to justice."

"Oh dear!" cried Mr. Cranston in great alarm. "I do most sincerely hope not."

When he had gone away David and Inspector Mitchell faced one another again.

"I don't think I need question Gash now, do you?" the Inspector said presently. "He would be sure to deny everything in any case."

"Very probably."

"I mean taking Mr. Cranston's evidence with what that boy Pritchard said and what the half-wit saw, and the reports about the various thefts, we seem to be all set for a solution, if you get my meaning?"

David considered for a few minutes.

"Oh!" he said. "I never thought of that!"

MONDAY

CHAPTER XIV

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Mr. Schofield sat at the open window of his room leaning his aching head on his hands. His tumbled bed looked cold and sordid in the half-light. To keep his thoughts from the past he had read until well after midnight. But as soon as he had switched off the light and tried to sleep, visions of Sonia in her youth, in her sorrow, in her false recovery, in the early days of their ill-fated marriage, had come crowding into his mind stirring him to wakefulness and misery. At last he could bear it no longer, but got up and sat by his window, watching the stars go out and the dim forms of the school buildings take shape in the grey dawn. The stinging part of his present pain was his realization of Sonia's worthlessness. It bewildered him to have his earlier conception of her destroyed. He had raged against her at the time of the divorce, had suffered the humiliation inseparable from her open preference for another man, and the injustice of her ill rewarding of his love. But he had taken a twisted pride in her beauty, her talent, her attractiveness. She had been his, even though he had lost her so soon. He had believed that the failure had been his, not hers.

All this had been swept away by her reappearance. Hurrying hither and thither through the past, snatching at his remembrances of her, he saw in the light of his present knowledge that everything she had been before was a preparation for this later vision of her. Always selfish, restless, shallow; of a brittle beauty that had not survived hardship; inconstant, but unsatisfied because ungenerous. He saw her completed portrait, and he saw seven years of his own life wasted in self-punishment for something that had never existed save in his own imagination.

He admitted to himself that he was shocked at his cynical estimation of her decline. His romantic myth died hard. But he remembered and acknowledged with determined honesty his complete and scornful indifference when that evening she had spoken to him outside the museum. His name on her lips had given him no pang. He had suffered in the museum when she had displayed her true self to the police inspector and the others. But her wretched insincere appeal as he walked with her to the Cranstons' cottage had touched neither his heart nor his mind. He was a little embarrassed as he would be if a casual acquaintance tried to borrow money from him. But otherwise he was unmoved. It was only later, when he began to realize what a revolution was taking place in his own soul, that the conflict had begun.

His arms sagged forward on the window-sill, his head sank down upon them and for a little while he slept. When he woke, stiff and cramped, the sun

was up, shining on the potting-shed and sparkling from the glass frames over the young lettuces. He decided that he liked Denbury School, that he was sorry to be leaving at the end of the term. He would have to think about another job. And then quite naturally it came to him that this temporary work was not at all what he really wanted. He had wandered about because all the time he had been waiting, searching. For what? For Sonia to come back to him? For someone else to comfort him? Vain hopes. There was no Sonia, only a fading woman clinging to her diminishing charms, complaining of the fate she had chosen for herself so deliberately. There would be no other single person to take her place. But there was his work: small boys, blessedly unfeminine, waiting to be taught, to be played with, to be set on a road that would lead them on in safety and happiness. Mr. Schofield prayed that he was not yet too old to find the permanent post that he now desired with his whole heart.

Just before he left his place at the open window he heard voices at the back gate, and a moment later a dark blue car drove slowly up the back drive. In it sat Inspector Mitchell and the detective-sergeant who had been working with him on the case. They looked pinched and grey, and were not talking to one another as they drove up to the museum door.

Looking in his mirror as he shaved it occurred to Mr. Schofield that, like himself, the two men must have been up all night.

Judith Redesdale stood rather helplessly in the centre of her sitting-room. The chairs and sofas had been pushed back to the wall so that they encircled the clear space where she was standing. Mr. Redesdale, David Wintringham and Inspector Mitchell were near one of the windows, pushing backwards and forwards a small table, and setting chairs now close to it, now further off. At last the Inspector held up his hand.

"That'll do," he said. "We want it to be possible for someone, or rather several people, to get round the table and look out of the window, and they must be able to seem quite natural doing it. Now we want a large bowl of flowers for the centre of the table. Yes, Doc, that's the ticket. Now Mrs. Redesdale, do you happen to wear a nice little gold watch, or platinum, I'm not particular?"

Somewhat bewildered, Judith took off her wrist-watch and handed it to Mitchell. It was a small, elegant affair, and he received it with expressions of joy.

"Splendid! This is just what I want."

"What for?" asked Judith. Monday morning at ten o'clock with a dozen household jobs to attend to did not seem an ideal time for parlour tricks.

"I want it to be stolen," said the Inspector happily. He put it close to the bowl of flowers on the side nearer the window and stepped back into the room

to judge the effect. “That’ll do nicely. Can’t be seen from the room unless you are snooping around on purpose. Don’t be alarmed, Mrs. Redesdale,” he added, seeing the look of horror on Judith’s face, “you shall have it back. But the point is this. In five minutes’ time I propose to have the actors in, the whole boiling of them, except Bassett, who is waiting to go up before the magistrate as soon as I’ve finished here. I believe the thief, who is also the murderer of Robert Fenton, will spot your watch and pick it up. The doctor is convinced that he is a genuine kleptomaniac. Otherwise he would not have risked stealing property outside the company and after he had killed the man who discovered him at it. He is likely, therefore, to swallow any bait. The other members of the company won’t think twice about a watch on a table; they are used to things lying about. This thief is expecting to get away with the whole affair, because he thinks I think Bassett is the man we want. He will expect to be miles away from here when the watch is missed. So you see, if he falls to the temptation, and after I have, if I am lucky, made him give himself away about the murder, I shall be able to arrest him before he leaves the room and find the watch on him, confirming his guilt.”

“Oh,” said Judith tremulously, “I would so much rather it didn’t have to be my watch.”

“I’ll borrow Jill’s, if you like,” volunteered David. “She’s waiting outside in the car.”

“Oh, I must go to her!” cried Judith. “Why didn’t you bring her in? I don’t really mind, Inspector. But I don’t think you ought to have told me your plan. I might warn your intended victim.”

“You don’t know which it is.”

“No, of course I don’t. Can you start at once? Can it all be finished quite soon?”

“The sooner the better,” said Charles Redesdale. “The boys are all in their form-rooms at present, working. If possible I want to avoid this scene being prolonged into break. It would be hardly suitable for the boys to watch your arrested man being taken away.”

“I should think not,” echoed Judith.

“Well, if Mrs. Redesdale consents to giving me the loan of her watch we might say we are now all set,” said the Inspector agreeably, and held the door open for Judith to pass out.

The Shakespeare Players Ltd. entered the room timidly, in little nervous silent groups. They had guessed the purpose of the present meeting, and everyone dreaded its outcome. George Lemming, who had waited in the front drive for the arrival of the manager, stood with him at one side and discussed the situation in a voice too low for the rest of the cast to hear.

“Know what he’s up to?” asked Dewhurst, surreptitiously jerking his thumb in Mitchell’s direction.

"Wish I did. Perhaps he'll tell us Bassett has confessed."

"Do you really think that's likely?"

"What? Lionel confessing, or the Inspector telling us if he did?"

"Either."

"Frankly, no. But I had to say something, hadn't I?"

Dewhurst smiled, but without amusement. He looked at his company.

"Where's Sonia?" he asked sharply.

"Late as usual. She doesn't doss with the other girls, you know. She's in the Cranstons' cottage." He made his way round the table near the window, stooping as he did so to smell the flowers in the big bowl. "There, you can see the cottage behind those trees."

Dewhurst and one or two others squeezed round after him.

"She lives in the lap of luxury," said Nigel Trent.

"But a good deal of supervision," put in Edward Gash. "Miss Cranston has Principles, I am sure."

"Do you mean that white building?" asked Dewhurst.

"No." They all crowded up, pointing. "Those chimneys… That bit of red roof… In that clump of trees… The red tiles just show— "

"Why, there's Sonia herself, coming along the path," said Dewhurst, "better late than never."

He led the way back into the centre of the room and chose for himself an armchair near the fireplace. The rest of the cast disposed themselves in a circle. Sonia Fenton was admitted, smiled wanly at George, went up to Dewhurst and shook hands in a silence which she intended to be charged with emotion, and was found a chair at his side. George Lemming took a seat near the table in the window.

Three policemen stepped quietly into the room, taking up positions of advantage. The actors' eyes grew large with apprehension. Inspector Mitchell turned his back on the company as he brought forward a chair, setting it beside the one in which David was installed.

"Everything in the garden is lovely," he muttered.

"See him take it?" whispered David.

"No fear. This is a bloody professional, this is."

"I have arranged this meeting," began Inspector Mitchell, "because I know how fed up you all are at being kept here. But I know you all appreciate my reasons for doing it, especially as the case has been concluded in a way that will no doubt be satisfactory to all the innocent parties. So I will tell you first of all the full reasons for the arrest and detention of one of your number."

The whole company loosed great sighs of relief and handed one another cigarettes.

"Lionel Bassett," went on the Inspector, "got himself in wrong with the whole boiling of you, but worst of all with Fenton. He was not a particularly good actor, and he was clumsy and inefficient off the stage when he was expected to take his part scene-shifting and loading the lorry. Besides this he was tactless, always putting his foot in it and treading on everyone's corns. So it wasn't any wonder you all picked on him when your property began to disappear. Especially as you heard that similar things had happened in the company to which Bassett had been transferred temporarily. When Fenton was killed it seemed to be obvious that Bassett had had the opportunity to do it. Why, he came and told you he'd discovered him lying in the museum. He could easily have hit him first before reporting to you. The motive of the thefts seemed to apply to him, and his obvious fear, amounting at last to panic, left only one conclusion to be drawn. Taking all that with the fact that another theft had occurred in the Masters' House itself, after the murder, and that part of the stolen money was found in Bassett's own pocket, you would naturally ask why I am taking the trouble to inform you of something you will be reading in the papers in the course of the next few days. Well, I am sorry to disappoint those of you who have a heartfelt down on Lionel Bassett. But I can say with absolute certainty that he was *not* the thief, neither did he murder Robert Fenton."

A genuine gasp of dismay filled the room. Edward Gash sat upright in his chair, holding the edges of it with rigid arms as if he feared to slip off. George Lemming leaned his elbow on the table at his side and rested his head on his hand.

"The man who committed this crime," continued Mitchell, "is the very opposite in character to Lionel Bassett. He is also an expert in petty larceny; he can pick up people's valuables in the twinkling of an eye, right under their owners' noses. Bassett is quite young. He has only been in the theatrical profession for three years. Before he joined the Shakespeare Players he was at a school of acting and then had a job for a few months with a suburban repertory company. At neither of those places were there any thefts during his time of being there, nor during his first year with this company. So it seems hardly probable that he would suddenly blossom out with a technique of stealing that is wholly professional in its efficiency. Secondly, the man who killed Fenton had very little time in which to do it. You all know the play pretty well, I expect. But I wonder if you all know the exact timing of it, the exact moments of exits and entrances, so perfectly that you could pick on a safe time—could know, under sudden provocation, if it was safe for you to act. Bassett wasn't that kind of man. He put up a good show as this Aguecheek because it was the part of a half-wit, I understand, and he just had to be natural. But I find he has difficulty in learning parts, taking his cues, and so on. No, the kind of man who struck Fenton, knowing he had every chance

of getting away with it, was a man who knew his play inside out, either from long experience of the stage or because he was a damned good actor."

All eyes turned to Edward Gash, who still sat frozen and unmoving, but with a face now grown extremely white.

"It has come to my knowledge," said the Inspector, eyeing Gash severely, "that you sustained a bruise on the upper part of the left arm on Friday night, apparently in the museum. Perhaps you would like to give me some explanation of that, why you said it had happened on Saturday, which was a lie, and why you wandered about the grounds, seemingly half-demented, when the rest were trying to give assistance to the doctors."

"Damn you!" cried Gash suddenly. "Don't try that cat and mouse act on me. I'll tell you. I found Fenton —*found* him, do you hear? I didn't hit him, I swear that, but I found him long before Bassett did. I saw him lying on the floor and I ran forward to help him and tripped over a box, hitting my arm on the edge of one of those bloody museum cases; they stick out a mile. I expect you've noticed. When I reached him— "

"That will do for the present," said Mitchell, holding up his hand.

"Oh, will it? I'm damned if it will. I'll bloody well clear myself without your permission—I'll— "

"You don't have to clear yourself," said the Inspector. "Don't talk like a film star until you're charged with an offence. Who said I thought you were responsible for this murder? Not me, if I recollect what I've just said."

"You asked me about my bruise," faltered Gash.

"I know I did. I wanted these other gentlemen to hear you, as it had a bearing on what follows. And I said a good actor could have committed the crime. You chose to take that as applying to yourself. But I said as well that a man of experience would have done equally well. It was a man of experience who fills this bill."

The company glanced uneasily to right and left and finally their unwilling gaze settled on George Lemming, still sitting quietly at the table, with his elbow upon it and his head resting on his hand.

"To go back a bit," said Mitchell, catching the eye of the nearest policeman and nodding gently, "when Bassett came back from the other company the story began to circulate that thefts had taken place over there. Who started that rumour? Bassett, you'll say. And my answer is, not Bassett himself, surely to goodness? That is, if he *was* a thief. Think that over. But who kept the story going, and had it verified with the other company? Mr. George Lemming, acting he says under orders from Fenton. Well, Fenton is not here to confirm it, poor chap. But Mr. Lemming is just the sort of man for the job, or for any job. Efficient, look at the way he does your lighting and that —an actor, engineer, handyman —turns to on anything that wants doing. Who took charge directly Fenton was off the map? Mr. Lemming. He knew where

everyone was at every minute of the play. He thought he had it all taped. He took Gash's pay envelope, and then to his surprise Fenton came into the museum. That was something Lemming had not expected. He knew Fenton and Bassett were in the habit of putting on their stage bandages in the wings. He'd taken care to see all the properties were in place with the help of Gash before the play started. Now he was caught. Fenton accused him—we know that from Miss Carson. He struck him down."

"That is utter nonsense!"

The protest came from Mr. Dewhurst. Everyone turned to look at him. The manager ground out the stub of his cigarette against the tiles of the fire-place and said more quietly but with great indignation, "You can't possibly build you case against George Lemming, Inspector. I've known him for years. From what you've said I should think Gash is your man. But it couldn't have been George. He was in the wings at the time. He didn't leave the stage till nearly the end of the play."

"Perhaps you will let me finish," said the Inspector, politely, exchanging a swift glance with David Wintringham. "In Robert Fenton's pocket was found Mr. Lemming's pay envelope. How did it get there? Fenton was not the thief: that theory we found was untenable. Did he snatch the envelope from the hand of the thief? Why then was it not taken away again? Unless Mr. Lemming, having secured Gash's envelope and silenced Fenton, thought it would lead suspicion from himself if he planted his own envelope where it could be found later. And that brings us naturally to the other plant, I mean Mr. Warwick's money, one pound of which was found on Bassett, but only one. Who spent the best part of the afternoon in the Masters' House when it was practically deserted? Mr. Lemming. And now," said the Inspector, quelling with his glance the rising tide of excitement in his listeners, "we come to the crux of the matter. When Gash helped Fenton up and the injured man, not realizing how grave his condition was, went back to the stage to play his last scene, why did he not tell Lemming he had discovered the thief that was plaguing them and that he had received a severe blow on the head? Because the concussion had knocked it out of his memory? That is possible. But I think more probably because Lemming himself had delivered the blow. So Fenton went on the stage and played his scene and said his lines for the last time, while his murderer stood beside him on that stage and— "

"Stop!" Dewhurst strode across the room to Lemming's side.

The latter moved at last. He gripped the edge of the table until the tendons stood out on the back of his hand, but he smiled ironically up at his manager.

"You needn't worry about me," he said.

"Indeed I shall." Dewhurst pointed a finger at the Inspector. "How can you have the face to invent a lying trap like that? Trying to get a confession, or what? You know as well as I do that Fenton never took his last call. Lemming told me so during our conversation on Saturday afternoon."

"Oh!" sighed the actors, unwillingly convinced by this lie of the stage-manager's guilt.

"I meant the curtain-call," explained George Lemming gently, "Bob did his stuff with Lionel, the drunk scene at the end, asking for the apothecary, I mean."

"I didn't think he was seriously hurt," stammered Gash, "he picked himself up and told me to go to hell. I kept out of his way after that. He seemed all right. I let him go on the stage again without telling anyone. I didn't know— "

"Are you all mad?" cried Dewhurst furiously, "here is Gash practically saying he did and the Inspector picks on George, who tells some cock-and-bull story about Fenton acting his last scene. He couldn't have done it!"

The company stared at him with frightened eyes. They were all superstitious, and this new development was beginning to make their skins tingle. But Mitchell remained his former matter-of-fact self.

"Why not?"

"Because he was lying on the museum floor. I keep telling you George couldn't have done it, he was in the wings at the time. Gash said a while back and again just now that he found Fenton (he means he hit him) some time before the end of the play."

"Gash mentioned no times when I was asking him," said the Inspector sternly, "up till quite recently it has been assumed that the time of the blow was *after* the scene with the bandages, and before the curtain-calls. Now, thanks to Dr. Wintringham, we think that it took place *before*. And so apparently did you, Mr. Dewhurst — even before Gash spoke. *How did you know that fact*?"

The manager was speechless. Mitchell nodded, and the three policemen, who had closed silently in behind Lemming, took Dewhurst in a firm grip.

"Cyril Dewhurst," said the Inspector, "I arrest you for the wilful murder of Robert Fenton. Search him," he ordered.

Almost the first object to emerge from the manager's waistcoat pocket was Mrs. Redesdale's elegant gold watch. Inspector Mitchell shook his head at it as it lay in his palm. "You made a bad mistake when you took this, Dewhurst," he explained. "You see, the doctor and I put it ready on the table for you."

The manager uttered a roar of fury and struggled with his captors. But his resistance was short-lived. He collapsed as suddenly as he had begun to fight, the red colour faded from his face, he began to look afraid.

"You're wrong!" he panted. "You can't prove it. I went by hearsay. I didn't know when Bob was struck. How could I? I was miles away from here. I left at the end of the second interval. There was a master saw me off. I can prove it."

"You drove out of the front gate," replied Mitchell, "and you stopped again at the back gate. You left your car in the road while you went back to the museum. One of the masters nearly drove his car into it while it was waiting there. That's how I got to know."

Dewhurst's face was livid.

"I went back to give George a message," he croaked, "but the museum was empty. I saw no one, I tell you—no one."

Inspector Mitchell looked at him gravely.

"We won't argue that now," he said. "Carry on." In a dead silence the manager was led from the room.

Jill Wintringham was feeling rather bored. She had been sitting in the car for a considerable time, having refused her sister's hospitality on the grounds that David had said he would not be long. On the other side of the drive a police car blocked the passage between the Sanatorium and the school buildings, cutting off the entrance to the back drive. Another police car, she knew, was drawn up in the road outside the main gate. Inspector Mitchell was taking no chances. Looking at the smart paintwork of the empty car belonging to Cyril Dewhurst, Jill, who had got the latest news of the case from David, felt a ridiculous pity on its behalf. Such a respectable well-groomed little car, as socially aspiring as the conscientious suburban housewife. Like the bewildered and outraged mate of the defaulting bank clerk or the homicidal engineer, poor F.L.O. 48 was doomed to a swift fall. She would enjoy a brief notoriety as "the car that was left at the gate" and then pass into oblivion by way of the second-hand market.

But Jill was wrong. Voices at the doorway of the school made her look up. A group of people had arrived at the top of the steps. She saw Dewhurst, white and dishevelled, with handcuffs on his wrists, held by two stalwart policemen, one on either side. She turned away her head to avoid seeing more, but the next instant loud shouts made her look back. A confused mass of arms and legs and bodies was rolling down the school steps. Dewhurst, outwardly broken and unresisting, had planned a desperate attempt at escape. As he and his captors moved off the top step he had shot out his foot and tripped the man on his right. The policeman had fallen heavily, still gripping Dewhurst's arm, so that the manager was pulled over on top of him. The third man, finding the prisoner wrenched from his grasp, made a frantic grab at him, missed the second step, and fell headlong beside the other two. Mitchell at the top took a flying leap to the bottom, but encountering the waving legs of the second officer, was brought down in his turn.

The motion-picture quality of this scene held Jill enthralled and paralysed. She saw Dewhurst struggle out of the group, gain his car, wrench open the door with his manacled hands, and fling himself into the driving seat. His

engine started with a roar. She was then aware that for the last few seconds another noise had held the background of her hearing—the long buzzing wail of the police car's self-starter, refusing to do its work. The man at the wheel fiddled and cursed; the man beside him leaped out and began to run towards Dewhurst's car. With a great grinding of gears the manager got under way, forcing the car to move against the brakes, which with his handcuffed wrist he was finding it difficult to release.

Without thinking very clearly what she was doing, but feeling that someone must attempt to secure the criminal whom David had so largely helped to capture, she started her own engine and plunged forward to cut Dewhurst off. But by now he had freed the brakes and his car was gathering speed. He swerved as Jill approached and scraped past her with a loud clang from the momentary hooking of bumpers.

Unfortunately at the moment that Dewhurst started the police car's engine woke to life. The machine leaped forward, scattering the men who had picked themselves up and were rushing across the drive. Obscured by the manager's car from one another's view Jill and the police driver found themselves all set for a head-on collision. By a miracle of luck and quick reaction-time they avoided this and came to a standstill with locked mudguards, breathless and blasphemous.

Dewhurst's car roared down the drive, swaying and lurching from side to side but gathering speed as it went. The door on the manager's side, left unfastened, swung and banged in and out. For the moment his mad attempt appeared to have succeeded.

But the patrol outside the gate had heard the sounds of conflict and collision. He realized that something was up. With grave good sense he drove his car slowly forward and stopped it across the entrance to the drive. He turned his head to discover the cause of the tumult and gave a yell of terror. For what he saw was Dewhurst's car twenty yards off and approaching at great speed. He flung his legs over the open side of the police car and leaped away just in time.

Dewhurst made no attempt to stop. The patrol swore afterwards that he accelerated right up to the end. Either he was hopelessly handicapped by his bound wrists or beyond caring. Capture and death were behind him, a millionth chance in front. He went ahead.

His car hit the patrol car broadside on, driving it into the middle of the road. The murderer, leaning sideways away from the steering-wheel, shot out of the open door of his own car. He could do nothing with his hands to save himself. He was flung onto his head on the hard road and broke his neck.

CHAPTER XV

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The crash was heard all over the school. Boys dropped their books and pencils, masters broke chalk against the black-boards. In the more indisciplined form-rooms there was a general rush to the window. For most of the class-rooms looked out from the length of the school buildings that lay at right angles to the front drive. Into them the earlier sounds of commotion had penetrated, spreading restlessness and inattention. It was in them that the final noise was most appalling in its sudden shock and the ominous silence that followed it.

Miss Fawcett, sorting the laundry at the top of the other side of the school, heard it as a distant ill-defined calamity. She diagnosed broken crockery, hoped that the kitchen was not in for serious trouble, but feared the worst. Nothing this morning could trouble her much. She had broken the news of her engagement to Mrs. Redesdale, had been kissed and congratulated very kindly, and in consultation with Mr. Redesdale had been given the afternoon off with John Hill to go into Stanhurst to buy the ring.

The domestic staff heard the accident and crowded to the kitchen window, but as it faced the grounds they were not enlightened. The gardeners, the steward, and the school sergeant, who were at work outside, heard it and came trooping up from the back drive. The actors heard it and stood in frozen groups in the drawing-room too overwhelmed by recent events to be capable of action. But David Wintringham remembered Jill, waiting for him in the drive, and rushed out to find her. Judith Redesdale too, busy upstairs collecting her daughter's wash, thought of her sister, and came running down into the hall. They found her with Charles Redesdale and Inspector Mitchell at the telephone. Forestalling David's anxious inquiry Jill said quickly, "In the road, darling! Go quickly. He drove straight into the second police car—horrible!"

She lowered her voice as Mitchell got through to Stanhurst Police Station, demanding an ambulance immediately.

David hurried down to the gate, but there was nothing for him to do. Dewhurst was dead, and the patrol had got clear. He inspected his own car which was being detached with some difficulty from the official mudguard, and went indoors again.

He found the sitting-room occupied by Jill, the Redesdales, Lemming and Gash, and Inspector Mitchell. He confirmed the manager's death, adding conventionally for the comfort of his hearers that it must have been

instantaneous. Judith, looking rather white, said it was the best thing from the victim's point of view.

"It was," agreed Mitchell, "though we might have had a bit of trouble in court. That mental boy, Billy Oldfield, would hardly make the best kind of witness, if he was allowed to give evidence at all. We had to rely on his information about Mr. Schofield and about Dewhurts's car, but he must have missed seeing the manager go up the drive some time just before Schofield turned up."

"And yet that was just the sort of thing he would be likely to miss," said David. "He was there principally to see the actors' costumes. An ordinary man in ordinary clothes walking up the drive would make no impression on him at all. Schofield impressed him because he was obviously upset. Billy must have been in the vegetable garden when Dewhurst popped the club in the water-butt."

"How did you discover it was Dewhurst's car that Billy saw standing in the road?" Mr. Redesdale asked the Inspector.

"I didn't. The rain on Saturday night washed away all the marks. We didn't hear of that car till Sunday. But in any case I doubt if we should have got anything from tyre marks. A good many cars turn in and out of your back drive or stand in the road waiting, so the marks would be well mixed up and almost impossible to identify. Also I found this morning before our meeting that Dewhurst's tyres were worn pretty smooth, all four of them. But I guessed it must be his car the night of the murder, and bluffed him into the admission."

"You surpassed yourself," said David. The Inspector looked sheepish.

"Not in my line—the sort of gassing I did in here. But I had no proper confirmation. I was all at sea till Doc. here explained the delayed compression business. I couldn't fit the crime on to anyone up to that moment, because though I thought of the manager coming round by the back gate, either Gash or Lemming or both were wandering about outside when it was supposed to be done, and I never really suspected either of them."

"Thank you," said George Lemming politely. "I must say you gave me gip when you started pinning it on me in here."

"Sorry, old boy," said the Inspector genially. "But I had to make Dewhurst give himself away about the times. I knew he would try to defend you if he thought he could do it in safety. You are the most valuable man in this company to him and he knew of course that you were innocent. He must have been mad when he realized Fenton had acted again after the blow he gave him. If he had grasped that point earlier and kept his mouth shut we should have had a much more difficult job to convict him of the murder and not Gash, though we could have pinned the thefts on to him. I realized when I talked to him on Saturday that he had it fixed in his head it was earlier, but I didn't connect up till we changed the time of the murder. It was lucky you didn't

blow the gaff on Saturday afternoon."

"Not altogether lucky," said Lemming modestly. "You see, I had suspected for some time that he was the thief in the company."

"Well, I'm blessed!" said the Inspector.

"I felt the same as you did about Bassett," continued the stage-manager, "and it really was Lionel who first mentioned the thefts in the other company. By the way, you were wrong about his acting. There isn't such a thing as natural acting. That's a mistake the lay public always makes. Bassett's appearance helped his performance but that was the only natural part of it. The rest was not very successful technique. He'll always be clumsy, I'm afraid. You should have heard the noise he made creeping out the night he tried to escape; enough to wake the dead, though I must say the boys slept through it. But about those thefts in the other company. Dewhurst was quite willing to agree to Lionel's guilt, but he wanted to avoid taking action which would have meant putting a stop to his own activities, so he kept insisting on red-handed proof, knowing we should never get it."

"He must have taken my medals when I was writing his cheque," said Charles Redesdale suddenly. "I talked to him in here and went over to my study to write it. Damned impertinence!"

"It was lucky your daughter spotted they had gone," said Mitchell, "because that narrowed it down to him or Fenton, who were the only two members of the company who had been in this part of the school previous to the performance. Unfortunately we didn't get that piece of information until Mr. Cranston recollected it last night."

"Now I come to think of it, Brenda did try to say something to me about the medals," Judith put in, "but it was all mixed up with Mr. Cranston's watch, and I'm afraid I did not try to sort it out."

"That is one of the adult sins," said Jill, "not listening to children politely."

"I can listen to anyone politely," David answered, "but I don't necessarily hear anything they say."

"If I listened to all the boys say," added Charles, "I should be deaf or demented or both."

"Oh, I know," Jill insisted, "it is like looking for amber on the sea-shore. But the Inspector would have got the Indian club twenty-four hours sooner if he and Charles had not put the fear of God into the school."

"That's right," Inspector Mitchell grinned. "Young Pritchard's work was the first really constructive thing in this case. He summed it up himself perfectly when he said the water-butt was the only likely spot on his beat."

"How do you mean?"

"Just that. He eliminated the two sheds, and that left the water-butt. From the museum to the gate, unless a hole had been dug for it under the hedges,

that was the only good place for the weapon. The Stanhurst men missed it because they were not thorough. When I looked myself on Sunday and ran the fresh rain water off it wasn't there of course. But it had been the day before. Therefore the murderer had gone down the back drive, at any rate as far as the water-butt. Now the back drive was the most exposed route to take from the museum. You would have thought any member of the cast would have sneaked round the museum wall into the gardens or round the boot-room or the sheds—all perfectly good places, with holes and bushes etc. to stick the club in unobserved. But he chose the water-butt. That suggested to me one thing —that the murderer had dropped the club in the water-butt in a hurry, *on his way out of the school premises*. The same thing occurred to the doctor when I pointed out what Pritchard had said. With Billy's mention of the car, and the probability that the thefts in the two companies were committed by someone in touch with both, and with the time factor panning out as it did, I was certain in my own mind. But I had no real proof. So I had to stage the bit of melodrama we pulled off with Mrs. Redesdale's cooperation."

"I'll never wear that watch again," Judith shuddered.

"He was a real expert," said David. "I was watching, but I didn't see it go, neither did Mitchell. He pulled off the old conjurer's gag when he had a crowd round him in the window. Suddenly drew their attention to Mrs. Fenton coming along the path. I was had too, looked away for a split second and the watch was gone."

Lemming said thoughtfully, "I suppose he took Mr. Warwick's money while he was waiting for me at the Masters' House. He must have been alone there for nearly ten minutes while the maid who showed him there came to look for me in the grounds."

"Of course he did. And at the same time planted one quid in Bassett's discarded coat, which was lying downstairs. He over-reached himself there, though the evidence only came in just now. If I'd had it before I wouldn't have done all that speechifying."

"Don't let it rankle," said David. "It was very much appreciated by the players."

"Tell us," said Jill. "Don't listen to David."

"When Dewhurst left here on Friday night," resumed the Inspector, "he had with him Mr. Redesdale's medals and Gash's money. He was late getting to Eastbourne as Lemming discovered when he rang up. The excuse Dewhurst gave was that he had a puncture on the way. Naturally in checking up the movements of everyone involved, I had that gone into, but no garage between here and Eastbourne, on the direct route anyhow, was able to remember changing a wheel or mending a tyre. On the other hand none of the garages in Eastbourne seemed to have had the puncture in either. But his hotel yard-boy said he arrived without a spare wheel on the back, so I thought he must have been using his spare while the other was being mended, and that the garage

concerned had forgotten his car. But last night when I was practically certain he was our man, and I only wanted confirmation, it occurred to me that the most likely place for him to go to from here on the Friday night would be London, to dispose of the medals. So I made inquiries at garages on the London-Eastbourne road. It was a shot in the dark, but he was missing that spare and would hardly have left it in town. He was likely to leave the wheel somewhere near Eastbourne where he could pick it up next day. You see, he knew Lemming would be ringing him up about Fenton, and he must have an excuse for his lateness, but he dared not keep all that hot stuff about him. Actually it was a poorish excuse, because taking his delayed departure from the school together with the extra journey he could have changed three wheels in the time."

"Why did you think the puncture was real, and not just an excuse?"

"It was both. It had to be. But I don't for a moment suppose it was accidental. Since he cut the time so fine, he would want to save every minute he could. He probably never changed his wheel at all, just knocked a flint into his spare and drove on. Well, his mistake was this. He got his puncture mended at a garage just outside Eastbourne on the London road. There is a cross-country road back in this direction, which he seems to have taken to come over here on Saturday after collecting his mended tyre. Anyway, he made inquiries about this road at the garage. Not only that, he went back the same way in the afternoon and stopped in again for some petrol. Then he made his slip. Either by accident or carelessness he handed the garage attendant one of Mr. Warwick's notes. Now yesterday was Sunday, and anyway it was late when I left here. I was lucky in finding the same garage man on duty who had seen to the puncture and put in the petrol and taken the note to be changed. But the proprietor was not there; it is not a living-in garage. So I had to wait till this morning to get any news of that note. Fortunately the money from the till was paid in to the bank on Saturday morning, so there wasn't much to go through to-day. One of the notes was a number in Mr. Warwick's series."

"I suppose there is no chance of getting my medals back?" asked Mr. Redesdale sadly.

"We'll do what we can. But it will be hard to trace his associates now he's dead. Nothing he took had great value. That's typical of kleptomania; he did not need the stuff. The trouble is he had never been convicted. I sent up the finger-prints of the entire company on Saturday, including Dewhurst's—which he gave me quite willingly. But they were no help of course without any previous conviction. I only suspected him then. I had no proof."

"I'm glad you never seriously suspected me," said George Lemming. "I don't know if even my innocence would have been enough to counter your bull-dog methods."

"He couldn't suspect you after we changed the time of the murder," said

David. “You were on the stage. We all admired your lighting in the last scenes. You should hear Mr. Lawes on the subject. I knew you had been in the wings, so did most of the company. They were not likely to perjure themselves as one man. Besides, no one else understood your switchboard.”

“That’s true,” answered Lemming.

“And we knew Dewhurst had the requisite knowledge of the play because he produced it himself,” added David.

A constable came to the door to find Inspector Mitchell. The ambulance had arrived from Stanhurst. The Inspector took his leave. He explained to Lemming that Bassett would be released that morning, and that he would see him again in the afternoon at the inquest on Robert Fenton. Lemming would probably be called to the inquest on Dewhurst, but in the meantime the company was now free to go where it wished. To Mr. and Mrs. Redesdale the Inspector expressed his sympathy and condolence, not concealing his opinion that everything had turned out uncommonly well from the point of view of the school and publicity.

“If you get the reporters up here trying to make a nuisance of themselves,” he said, “tell them to attend Dewhurst’s inquest and they’ll hear the story—or as much of it as is good for them.”

The Redesdales thanked him warmly for his rapid handling of the case. They were exceedingly grateful to be let off so lightly. When he had gone briskly away, they found the actors also on the point of departure. Mr. Redesdale would not allow Lemming to indulge in any sort of apology, however genuine, for what had happened. It wasn’t the fault of any of the players, poor devils, and they had suffered quite enough already for their manager’s sins.

Gash and Lemming walked over to the Masters’ House, subdued but thankful. On the way Gash said, “Bob really thought I had hit him. When he got up he felt his head and accused me of it. I suppose he had been knocked so silly by Dewhurst he’d forgotten. Why didn’t he tell someone what he thought —that I’d struck him?”

“Bob would never have done that,” answered Lemming. “He would never have done anything prejudicial to your performance. He was a good judge of acting, in spite of his temper and his criticism. He thought a lot of you, Edward. You misjudged the old boy.”

“I’d like to make it up to him,” said Gash. “Only I can’t now.” He gulped painfully; the morning had been a trying one.

“Yes, you can. When you’re famous you’ll have proved him right. Go ahead and work like hell.”

Gash nodded. There were tears in his eyes.

After lunch David and Jill went back to their home in Hampstead. The off front mudguard had been hammered into a rough resemblance of its partner on the other side; the engine ran perfectly and appeared not to have suffered from the jolt.

"What, on earth induced you to enter the fray?" asked David, painfully conscious in a traffic jam of amused glances directed at the wing of the car.

"I was afraid Dewhurst might get away. I couldn't bear to let him defeat you at the last moment, after the way you had worked to catch him. Of course he couldn't have escaped really, but I was overcome by an impulse."

"Sweetheart, you are adorable."

"David, did you hear the news? Judith told me."

"News! Can anything have happened at Denbury besides the murder that one would classify as news?"

"Yes. Miss Fawcett has got engaged to her Mr. Hill."

"Miss— ? Oh, I know, the under-matron. Has she indeed? I wonder she found time in all that turmoil. But there is nothing so selfish as love, is there, darling? Look at my poor front wing. Only I don't call that news. It was a foregone conclusion."

"Oh, was it? Perhaps you will recall our bet, made during the first interval of the play—or is that news? I'll trouble you for five bob, Dr. David Wintringham."

Mr. Redesdale made a short speech to the boys in the dining-room before they sat down to their dinner. He chose this time because he hoped that in the subsequent filling of their stomachs their interest would be diverted from anything he might have said. He succeeded to a very large extent. Those who had been out with their parents most of the week-end accepted his news with calm and promptly forgot it. The police had left, the actors' lorry had gone from the back drive, and many personal problems and events had appeared since then to occupy their thoughts.

But Alastair Wintringham and Bruce Pritchard suffered from a feeling of flatness. Their week-end had been unique, and they were old enough to realize the fact and resent it. They strolled across to the pavilion seeing before them a dreary succession of games of cricket, work, and prep stretching out to the dim far-off summer holidays, six long weeks hence. "Only just after half-term," said Pritchard sourly, looking for his bat. He was not very good at cricket, which added to his present despondency.

"I wanted to ask Uncle David heaps of things," grumbled Alastair. "Now I don't know *when* I shall see him."

"You could write," said Pritchard doubtfully.

Alastair did not answer; the suggestion was too impracticable. He finished

fastening his pads and stood up.

"It's all very well for people like Coker Minimus," he complained in a bitter voice, "he'll be here another five years at least. But I'm leaving at the end of the term. There isn't an earthly chance of having another murder before then."

The Redesdales stood together near the window of their sitting-room. The school was quiet within, cheerful outside with the sounds of cricket and young voices calling. Charles Redesdale's hand rested on his wife's shoulder. "Well, my darling, it's been a terrible time, but I must say I have had the most magnificent support from the staff, and naturally from you. That goes without saying."

Judith put up her hand to his.

"And I think we may give thanks for one thing. We have suffered one of the direst calamities that could befall us and have come through practically unhurt. It is not the sort of thing that is likely to happen twice to the same school."

"I devoutly hope not!" said Judith. "At any rate," she continued dreamily, hearing the distant smack of leather on wood, "at any rate, it did manage to keep fine for the Fathers' Match."

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